

# The Dragonwing Effect

by kc7gr

Category: How to Train Your Dragon

Genre: Adventure, Humor

Language: English

Status: Completed

Published: 2014-06-28 10:15:42

Updated: 2014-09-27 07:51:10

Packaged: 2016-04-26 19:27:43

Rating: K+

Chapters: 16

Words: 138,194

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: A veterinarian-soldier of the late 21st century gets thrown back in time over 1,200 years - and doesn't even realize it at first! Besides figuring out what happened, and finding a way home, he's about to discover several new patients of a species which never made it into any textbook. Lots of OC's throughout, rated K 9 for mild coarse language and a bit of violence.

## 1. Chapter 1

DISCLAIMER: Cressida Cowell and Dreamworks own Berk, Stoick, Gobber, Hiccup, Toothless and all the other related places and characters, human and dragon alike. I'm just borrowing them for part of this story and I promise to put them all back when I'm done.

\*\*Sam Shay, Gerry Hoshino, Robert Dashiell and all other OC's, human and dragon, as well as the background of the United Nations Environment Corps (UNEC) and any other associated characters, are all the products of my imagination and creative efforts.

><strong>

Thanks in advance for reading. I hope you find the story to your liking. Updates will be posted every Friday for the next few weeks (there are sixteen chapters in all).

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 1\*\***

"\_In every walk with nature one receives far more than one seeks"  
\_(John Muir)

(Saturday, 23-Sep-2090, 07:30 BST, UNEC Ranger Base, Alladale Heights, Scotland)

The cool morning breeze brushed against Dr. Sam Shay's face, bringing

the scents of pine, fir, and just a hint of salt air from Dornoch Firth far below. He inhaled deeply, still waking up, wishing he hadn't drawn the weekend shift. He looked up as two VetMed aircars glided low overhead, making for the hangar behind him, the soft purr of their TQ generators overlaid with a whine from their thruster turbines.

He turned and walked eastward, smiling slightly, towards the hangar and the cluster of low buildings around it. Barely eighty years ago, such vehicles would have been limited to a science-fiction writer's imagination, along with much of the equipment any UNEC Ranger took for granted.

Sam had, almost from the time he could walk, been brought up on the tales of Clarke, Duane, Heinlein, Lackey, McCaffrey, Norton, and a score of others. Hawkbrothers, gryphons, Pern's telepathic dragons and their riders, Max Jones, the Time Patrol, the denizens of the Witch World — they were all, in their own way, as familiar to him as the myriad species of wild and domestic animals he'd treated and worked with over a long and fruitful career. For all the faults he could see with the world, Sam was deeply grateful to have found his niche.

He raised a hand to shield his eyes from the brilliant morning sun as he walked. It sparked highlights off the fog still covering the valley, from Lower Gledfield out to the broad Atlantic, and Sam could already feel it was going to be another unseasonably warm day.

\_And haven't they all been lately\_ he thought, as he reached the hangar and passed through one of the personnel doors, heading for the locker room. \_We got our 'damn flying cars,' superconductors, clean renewable energy and loads of other toys, but what's the world itself going to look like for our grandkids with the climate gone bonkers?\_

Global climate change, far from the myth many politicians and deniers once believed it to be, had turned out to be all too real. There was still much debate in scientific circles as to whether the carefully-calculated 'tipping point' had already been passed.

Calculations and debate aside, no one could deny what the shrinking polar ice caps had done to ocean levels the world over. \_Just ask the folks who remember Lonemore\_. \_Or those who remember a time when the Dornoch Bridge didn't need to be a meter and a half higher than it is now. We barely got any snow this last winter... way too much rain, though...\_

His musings were abruptly cut off by the locker room door getting shoved open from the opposite side, nearly into his face. "Whoa, there!" he said, backing up a step and holding up both hands, palms out. "Whatever it is, it can wait until I get inside!"

A narrow face topped with straight ebony hair, slanted amber eyes locking on to Sam's blue ones, grinned apologetically, looking up to compensate for Shay's six-foot frame. "Sorry, Sam" the other said.

Though shorter, at five-eight, Dr. Gerald 'Gerry' Hoshino was as stocky as Sam was thin, and considerably darker skinned. He was

dressed in the standard summer field uniform of a UNEC veterinarian-ranger; a short-sleeved, long-legged dark-blue jumpsuit, with a single emerald-green pinstripe down each arm and the outside of each leg.

The legs ended up in half-calf work boots which, contrary to appearance, were as comfortable as they were durable. White embroidered shoulder patches with the veterinarian's caduceus in red and the UNEC logo below in aquamarine completed the decorative touches. The suit's numerous pockets bulged with all manner of medical tools and sensors, while a wide web-belt supported handcuffs, portable radio, a Glock SmartLaser with spare power packs, and a pouch of flash-bangs.

"No harm done" Sam said, lowering his hands, his voice a clean tenor with more than a hint of Irish brogue. "Do you ever move slower than a panicked run? I wanted to ask about trading Monday-Tuesday with you, so I can get the next weekend off."

His colleague grinned wider. "Oho!" he said, his Hawaiian accent revealing his expatriated roots. "You don't fool me for a millisecond! You heard about the ice chunk they dug out of Helheim Glacier, the one with those oddball bones in it, you think they might actually be from your fantastical flying lizards, and you need the weekend to check it out!" The grin turned faintly malicious. "So... What am I offered for aggravating Lieutenant Dash's nerves, rearranging my busy schedule, and indulging your bizarre theories?"

Sam sighed, closed his eyes, counted to ten, then kept going with pi out to a dozen decimal places before he replied. "What did you have in mind, then?"

Hoshino made a show of examining his fingernails. "Oh, nothing much. A bottle of Chaucer's 2060 should do the trick."

Sam glared at him. "Who do you think I am, then? Donald Trump the Third?! 2085's the best I can do, and even that's stretching the budget a bit!"

"This from someone who's brother owns a good-sized bar? In Belfast, no less? 2080, and not a year later!"

Sam grumbled something impolite in Celtic. "Pub. They're called 'Pubs' on this side of the pond, you Yankee heathen! 2082, last offer, and I'll throw in a sixer of Guinness. Before we're late for briefing."

Gerry grinned again, stuck out a hand, and they shook on it. "Done! Watch the Big Board for the schedule change, I'll settle things with our fearless leader. See you there!" He zoomed off, moving with surprising agility for someone of his build.

Sam shook his head, muttered something about the energy of youth, and went to change into his own uniform and gear. He paused for a moment, studying his reflection in the mirror: Russet hair and neatly-trimmed goatee framed a face which looked far younger than Sam's forty-three years, all sharp angles and prominent cheekbones. It was no accident, given his unusual height and slender build, that he'd been dubbed 'Elf Lord Shay' by his college roommate. Fortunately, that particular

moniker was now lost to time.

A few minutes later, he entered the briefing room, already crowded with twenty-four others who had drawn the same shift. He settled into the only empty chair left, about a third of the way back " and quickly stood up again as something uneven and hard squeaked under his weight. With a growing sense of annoyance, he reached down and lifted a bright-green rubber T-Rex squeak-toy off the chair. He placed it on the table, then reached down for the second object.

It was a standard sheet of UNEC stationary, in light-blue linen texture, upon which was printed a color map of Helheim Glacier. A bright red circle, with an arrow pointing to it, had been added around the spot where the most recent archaeological dig was taking place. Next to the arrow, in old-style Gothic English lettering, was the legend 'Here be Dragons!' In the lower left corner, someone had added 'In case you get lost' in spidery handwriting.

It was only then Sam noticed the whole room had gone quiet. Too quiet. He glanced up " and received a round of somewhat mocking applause. "Oh, yes, very funny" he grumbled, crumpling the sheet and tossing it towards the wastebasket next to the room's podium. The rubber dinosaur followed quickly in its wake.

Unfortunately, Murphy's Law chose that moment for a demonstration. As the squeak-toy sailed through the air, Lieutenant Robert 'Dash' Dashiell walked in the door. The rubbery projectile bounced off the podium with a noise somewhere between a startled chicken and an asthmatic bicycle horn, and took up a new course which terminated precisely in the center of the Lieutenant's freshly-filled coffee mug. Head-first.

He froze in mid-stride, eyeing the unwelcome addition with one eyebrow elevated. Hastily choked-off chuckles sounded in a few spots in the otherwise silent room. With a long-suffering sigh, the Lieutenant carefully extracted the toy, shook it off, and dropped it in the wastebasket. "Apparently" he said, taking his place behind the podium, "someone is trying to convince me caffeine was responsible for the disappearance of the dinosaurs." He glared around the room. "Would anyone like to claim ownership of that particular theory?"

Sam cringed inwardly as Dash's piercing gray eyes seemed to linger on him longer than usual. "No? Good. Now, if you lot can kindly remember your respective ages and profession, I've got several announcements this morning..."

The briefing continued without further incident. Patrol areas for the shift were detailed, items of special concern discussed, and various groans of complaint or muffled cries of "Yess!" were uttered in response. "One final item" Lt. Dash added, aiming the remote at the holovid display. It promptly lit up as the room lights automatically dimmed, showing a 3D color projection of their part of the world.

He pressed a second button. A bright red arc appeared, beginning almost at the North Pole. It curved south across Baffin Bay and the southern tip of Greenland, then curved sharply east towards Ireland and the UK, ending almost on the northern border of France and Belgium, near Reims.

"As some of you may have heard, we're getting a total solar eclipse this evening, centered along the arc shown. It will begin near the pole at 16:16:52 UTC, and end over France at 17:31:10 UTC. The total phase will start at 16:53:50 UTC, and is expected to last just about three minutes."

He clicked another button. The projection disappeared and the room lights came back up. "We all know eclipses, particularly ones lasting this long, tend to bring out every looney with a prophecy and a pipe-bomb within a thousand clicks. This, unfortunately, includes the cults who still try to practice animal sacrifice. Remember April 11th, 2070?"

A series of groans and face-palms circulated the part of the room occupied by the older rangers. Most of the rookies looked confused. "This means" Lt. Dash continued, "stay sharp, watch your dispatch screens, and be ready to take up emergency pursuit at any moment between 17:00 and 18:45 local. Double-check all vehicle ordnance and hand weapons." He closed the cover on his tablet computer with a snap, and looked around the room once more. "Questions?"

There were none, and the Lieutenant nodded approvingly. "Very well, ladies and gentlemen, that is all. Clear skies and safe landing!"

Sam got up to follow the crowd filing out both doors. A few calls of 'Mooooo!' came from the others as they crowded together, followed by snorts of laughter. Sam was nearly at the door when he felt a firm hand grip his left arm. "Sam, a moment?"

He turned, reflexively stepping clear of the outbound flow. Lt. Dash gave him a look he was hard pressed to interpret, then said "A rubber T-rex?"

Sam flushed. "Sorry, sir. I was aiming for the wastebasket." He declined to mention what had brought about the minor bombardment.

Dashiell gave him a small smile, his well-groomed moustache twitching slightly. "Sam, you know the corps encourages all personnel to pursue hobbies, even when they're relevant to their normal job. Gerry tells me you two are trading shifts next weekend... something about some bones found in Helheim Glacier?"

Sam nodded, uncertainly. "Is it a problem, Lieutenant?"

Dashiell took a gulp of coffee, then made a face. "Ordinarily, no. In your case... Sam, do I need to remind you of your performance over the past couple of weeks? Two poachers nearly got away because you were just outside the border of your assigned patrol area, chasing some new angle on your flying-lizard theoriesâ€"

Shay stiffened. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

Dashiel nodded. "When have you not?" he added, with another smile.

"With respect, sir" he began. "I nailed one of those poachers, and Ranger Hennessy got the other. No animals sustained lasting harm, and I gained valuable insight into my theories. My goal, sir, is to prove

that extinction of a previously unknown species, presumably through human action, was the 'tipping point,' if you will, which triggered the catastrophic climate change we're experiencing now."

"And a respectable goal it is, Sam" Dashiell said. "You should keep going with it, but not at the expense of your \_normal\_ duties! You know as well as I do how much appearance counts, especially in a paramilitary organization like the UNEC Rangers. We're accountable directly to the Secretary-General for \_everything\_ we do, and how we do it! I respect what you're chasing, but you're not part of the Royal Archaeology Service and I can't keep covering for you. You're making yourself look bad and, worse, you're making \_me\_ look bad."

Sam swallowed uneasily. He and his C.O. had always gotten along well. Dashiell had started out as a MedEvac flight nurse, back when Sam was still in UNEC Basic, and had risen rapidly through the ranks. Though not a DVM himself, Dashiell had shown a remarkable ability, uncommon among commanders, to stay out of the way and let his Rangers do their jobs. The last thing Sam wanted was to see his boss "or himself" suddenly transferred to, say, one of the polar stations, or perhaps one of the remote outposts in the Urals.

He sighed, and met Dashiell's gaze once again. "So, if I understand you, I need to stick to the original schedule? I'm sure Gerry will be happy to hear that."

The Lieutenant shook his head. "No, don't worry about it. Enjoy next weekend, come back refreshed and \_on time\_, \_give me a Reader's Digest version of what you find, BUT... when you're on our clock, \_please\_ stay in your area and don't give me or the Big Brass any more reasons to think you'd do better in the private sector, OK?"

His expression softened, and he reached out a hand to grip Sam's shoulder. "You're as good a Ranger as you are a DVM. You can gain and keep an animal's trust quicker than anyone I've seen in the last decade, and you've got the patience of a diplomat. That's exactly the kind of talent I want to keep around. Deal?"

Sam sighed, and nodded firmly. "Deal. Will there be anything else, Lieutenant Dash, sir?"

Dashiell rolled his eyes. "Dismissed, Ranger Shay. Make me proud!"

After Sam had left, Dashiell wandered back to the wastebasket. Reaching in, he retrieved the crumpled ball of blue paper and unfolded it. He snorted softly as the 'Here be Dragons' map was revealed and whispered "If he only knew..."

(Northeast tip of Loch Loyal, Scotland. 17:25:20 BST)

Sam leaned back against the cave wall, breathing a deep sigh of relief as all four wolf cubs turned their full attention to their mother and the milk she carried. The female Gray wolf, still slightly groggy from the aftereffects of the mild anaesthetic, eyed Sam uncertainly as her cubs nursed. Her mate paced back and forth just outside the cave, held at bay by a portable isolation field Sam had set up just after tranquilizing the female.

Word of the impending birth had been automatically relayed to the onboard computer in Sam's aircar via the animal's TLC "Telemetry/Locator Chip. Every animal in the preserve had one. They were similar in principle to the earlier pet microchips, though much more powerful. Each rice-grain sized capsule, powered by the normal bioelectricity present in every living creature, combined a sensitive universal GNSS receiver, life-signs monitor, and a telemetry transmitter.

Solar-powered repeaters, scattered all over the preserve, picked up the low-power signals from the chips and relayed their data via satellite link to the UNEC network. Considering how many animals UNEC Rangers were responsible for, and the size of the areas those animals roamed, it was a very efficient system.

Sam was deeply grateful for its existence. Even with high-tech aid and contemporary medicine, it had been a close call. This particular female was getting on in years, and this birth had been particularly difficult, with two cubs coming out normally while the other two were breech. \_Probably be her last litter\_ he mused, as he collected his instruments.

Taking advantage of the new mother's still-groggy state, Sam leaned close and passed his left hand, covered to the elbow in a complex-looking gauntlet, over the wolf's body, then pulled back and looked at the display screen set into the forearm. Pulse, temperature, blood pressure, brain activity... all were rapidly returning to normal.

Working quickly, he reached for the special hypo and injected all four cubs with their own TLC's. The little ones barely noticed the slight pressure from the painless operation and it only took a few seconds to verify all four were transmitting, thanks to the diagnostic display in the Gauntlet.

\_Time to go\_ Sam thought, as he shouldered his pack and headed for the cave entrance. The male wolf's eyes widened as the human approached. He backed away, growling, torn between the normal timidity of his species where humans were concerned, and the desire to see what this stranger had done with his mate and young. "Easy, big fellow" Sam said, softly.

He started humming an old Celtic lullaby, one he'd found to be a consistent help in calming any nervous animal, though he'd never understood why. It had the desired effect; the wolf stopped growling and tilted his head slightly to one side, eyeing Sam curiously.

Still humming, he deactivated the isolation field, slung the generator over his other shoulder, and walked quickly away towards his aircar. Glancing behind him, as he loaded the Gauntlet and other equipment into the vehicle's cargo compartments, he smiled to himself as the male wasted no time dashing into the cave. Sounds of ecstatic greeting promptly followed, punctuated by an occasional yip from one of the cubs.

Settling into the left front seat, he secured his safety harness, lit up the engines and advanced both 'Lift' and 'Thrust' throttles. The vehicle rose smoothly into the darkening sky, the purr of its TQ drive modulating the whine from the twin turbines. Sam took up a

course which would bring him back to Alladale Base while giving him an excellent view " indirectly, of course " of the eclipse.

Engaging the autopilot, he activated the computer's log recorder and began dictating his report of the birth and adding the particulars on the new cubs, including their TLC ID codes and DNA signatures, to the preserve's master database. It didn't take long " speech recognition systems had come a very long way in the last few decades " and Sam rapidly concluded with "Computer, report completed, transmit."

"\_Report accepted\_" the machine's female-accented voice responded a few seconds later. After another brief pause, it continued: "\_No further dispatches or NOTAMs. Proceed Alladale Base at pilot's discretion."\_

"That's what I wanted to hear!" Sam said, with feeling. Assisting in the birth process of any species tended to be messy, at best, and this had been messier than usual. He was very much looking forward to a shower, clean clothes, and a meal which had never come within a kilometer of a freeze-drying machine or a government-issue package marked "Meal, Ready-to-Eat."

\_Hope the canteen's serving cod tonight\_ he mused, as he leaned back in his seat and enjoyed the soft colors of the clear evening sky, darkening quicker than usual with the coming eclipse.

His thoughts drifted to the Helheim dig and the most recent message a friend of his working the site had sent. \_Weirdest bones you've ever seen\_ the E-mail had read. \_Lighter and stronger than any previously known, even birds, and the inner structure is the same as a honeycomb...\_

Sam's speculation as to what manner of beastie would have honeycomb-structured bones was abruptly and rudely interrupted by the shrilling of an alarm from his console. PROXIMITY ALERT flashed in bright red letters on the computer display. Before he could so much as check his radar scope, a garish yellow object went streaking across his line of sight. His craft trembled as the other's wake turbulence brushed against him.

Long-established reflexes took over. Sam quickly checked his harness, disengaged the autopilot, then slid aside the plastic shield over a red button on his console and pressed. Instantly, his helmet visor snapped down and its HUD flared to life. Angling his craft upward and right, he shoved the thrust levers forward. The turbines whined vigorously in response, pushing his speed to a little over 300 knots in seconds.

His radio came to abrupt life. "\_Ranger nineteen, Alladale base acknowledging pursuit status."\_ He recognized the faintly-accented voice, and nodded in satisfaction. Alice Orlovsky wasn't much to look at, but the expatriated Russian was one of the sharpest tactical controllers in UNEC. "\_Be advised, target vehicle is the subject of an earlier pursuit by Ranger fourteen, who is en route. ETI, seven minutes."\_

"Nineteen, copy that" he said, crisply. His radar automatically locked on to the fleeing craft, scanned it, and provided a detailed



readout. "Alladale control, Ranger nineteen. Bogey is bearing zero-three-five, Angels eight at two-nine-zero knots, confirm radar contact?"

"\_Contact is confirmed" \_Alice replied, just as crisply. \_"Computer extrapolation suggests he's heading for the Shetlands. Also, be advised Ranger fourteen's earlier deep-scan indicated presence of Class Two contraband."\_

A flare of anger coursed through Sam's guts. Class Two meant live animals, most likely poached for the exotic-pet trade. Before he could reply, a bright white contrail burst from the other craft, heading straight for him. He cursed, rolled his ship sharply left, and fired a Sunburst decoy.

Fortunately, the missile was of an obsolete design. It went eagerly for the decoy, exploding harmlessly several hundred meters below Sam's position. "Control, bogey has fired on me" Sam snapped. "Request permission to go weapons-hot."

This time, it was Lt. Dashiehl who responded. \_"Ranger nineteen, you are clear to go hot, capture alive if possible. If not, fire at will."\_

"Nineteen, copy." He snapped aside the cover over another panel, and pressed two buttons in rapid succession. His weapons-status display lit up a reassuring green, reporting READY for the EMP cannon, airborne laser, SmartGun, and ECM systems. "Alive, hmm?" he muttered, closing on the fleeing yellow blob. "Arm EMP" he said, aloud.

Although the targeting computer needed only the correctly-phrased thought to perform the action, the vocalization served just as well. A red target circle appeared in Sam's HUD, danced around for a moment, then settled squarely over the yellow blob and turned green. At the same instant, a steady tone sounded in his headset.

He fired. A brilliant blue sphere leapt away from the nose of his ship, closing rapidly on the other. At the last second, the craft rolled sharply over and dropped. The blue spheroid zipped harmlessly through the now-empty space and vanished into the Atlantic.

He swore heartily, and dropped his own ship to match the other's course. At the same moment, his intership channel chimed. \_"Ranger nineteen, this is fourteen on your six. You missed, Sam."\_

"Sure, and tell me something I don't know!" he snapped as he readied another EMP charge. "If you really wanted to help, Gerry, you'd be trying to cut this lunatic off, so you would!"

"\_One lunatic, smuggled goods on the side, coming right up"\_ he replied, as his craft shot ahead at its top speed of 550 knots. A moment later, he called again. \_"Sam, did you get a close look at this thing?!"\_ His voice held surprise and disbelief.

"No, why?"

"\_It's an old Exeter-class cargo hauler with modified drives, and this guy's gotta be pushing his jets into redline to reach this kind of speed! All we have to do is stay with him and he'll bring himself

down..."\_

Two more contrails suddenly burst from the smuggler's vessel. The two Rangers moved as one, Gerry dropping left while Sam went right. Once again, both missiles were diverted by Sunburst flares. \_"Sure is a lousy shot," \_Gerry muttered.

By now, all three craft were rapidly approaching the Shetlands coastline at barely a hundred meters above the ocean. Suddenly, the yellow craft bucked in mid-flight. A stream of blue-gray smoke gushed from its left drive housing. \_"Hah!"\_ called Gerry. \_"Popped a coil! He's all yours!"\_

Sam quickly cut his own speed as the yellow craft dropped lower, obviously struggling to stay in the air. Its path was erratic enough to warrant bracketing its course with three EMP charges. Sam pulled up and hard about after he let loose the third, then circled back to keep an eye on their quarry.

One of the spheroids went high, discharging itself against a sea cliff and scaring the crap out of a flock of seagulls. The second went low, disappearing into the ocean.

The third was the charm. It struck the yellow craft squarely on the stern, enveloping it in a blue nimbus that was as bright against the eclipse-darkened sky as it was brief. The smuggler's ship dropped precipitously, skipped over the water twice, and shuddered to a halt on a rocky beach.

As Sam looked for a landing spot, he saw Gerry's craft already down near the garish yellow wreck. He climbed out and dropped to the ground, sidearm and flashlight up and ready and cautiously approached the smuggler's craft. \_"Sam, stay put" \_Gerry said, over his portable radio. \_"Light this guy up and cover me."\_

"Copy" he replied, snapping on his craft's landing lights and settling into a hover position three meters up. The glare threw sharp shadows off the pirate craft as the computer chimed softly and said \_"Total eclipse phase in progress. Two minutes, fifty-six seconds remaining."\_

Sam chuckled at this. "Eclipse just went total, Gerry" he said. "Think there's some hidden bonus for catching these cranks during one?"

"\_Let you know once I get the cuffs on 'em â€" hey! Rear hatch is opening! Stay sharp!"\_

Sam obligingly slewed his ship around to keep the now-open hatch bathed in brilliant light. A moment later, Gerry's voice yelled \_"Federal agent, keep your hands where I can see them and come out slow!"\_

Two swarthy figures emerged, blinking in the glare. One was stupid enough to bring an antique shotgun he'd held at his side to bear on Sam's ship, and was dropped a heartbeat later by the silver glare of a stun-pulse from Gerry's Glock. The first man out quickly put both hands on top of his head and knelt down.

A bright red spot sweeping across his canopy alerted Sam to a new

threat. Instinct took over as he turned his head towards the source of the sighting laser, a spotlight and his weapons following the helmet's movement. The glare illuminated a bulky black-skinned figure, sporting a goatee, glittering gold earrings " and a long black tube supported by one shoulder, a smaller tube on top winking red.

At one time, Sam had questioned the wisdom of a weapons system which could react to brain impulses. The wrong thought at the wrong time could result in an awful lot of paperwork at best, irreparable damage to the receiving parties and UNEC's reputation at worst.

Now, he couldn't have been more grateful for the feature. The single word \_Stun\_ flashed frantically through his mind, and his ship responded. The shooter convulsed as the powerful charge hit him squarely in the chest, and went down. The blast from his own weapon, a brilliant orange-white ball, zipped by Sam's craft close enough to light up the cockpit and vanished.

Gerry's response was equally swift. He stunned the first man where he kneeled, then dashed forward to the hatchway and fired another pulse into the body of the ship. A moment later, he called out \_"Code Four, Sam, and we've got live cargo... Are you OK?"\_

"Clear and bright" he replied, eyeing the slumped form of the would-be gunner. "One nearly singed me with a plasma bolt, but he'll not be making any more trouble"

Something went \_crack \_behind him. Fragments pinged off his ship's hull. Suddenly, the ship bucked upward and back, turbines whining in protest. \_"Sam?"\_ Gerry called.

"Here!" he snapped back, struggling to bring his suddenly-rowdy craft under control. "Got a problem..."

Gerry came barreling out of the smuggler's ship a moment later. What he saw caused his jaw to drop, and he went as still as the stunned smugglers.

Above and behind the beach, perched on a perfectly circular plateau, was a huge pewter-toned arch, gleaming like metal but with the rough-cut appearance of rock. Its center was a swirling blue-gray whirlpool of mist and lightning. Cryptic symbols glowed white around its perimeter.

And his friend's craft was being drawn steadily backwards, right into the middle of the vortex.

\_What in Sweet Saint Blaise's name...?!\_

He shook off his surprise, and called out "Sam! You're caught in some kind of whirlpool! Punch out, now!"

He winced as static crashed through his earpiece, Sam's voice barely making it through with what sounded like "...repeat..."

Sam had just enough time to register the pewter-toned archway, now glowing a fiery blue so bright he could see the color clearly through the amber polarizing of his helmet's visor, before a giant hand grabbed his ship and spun it and his consciousness into

oblivion.

## 2. Chapter 2

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 2\*\***

(1-Mar-840 AD, 08:33 UTC, east beach, island of Berk)

"\_You become responsible, forever, for what you've tamed" (Antoine de Saint Exupery)\_

It was the sun's heat that woke him. It beat mercilessly through the clear plexalloy canopy of the aircar, making its occupant feel like he'd been trapped in a dry sauna. Sam groaned and tried sitting up. Every muscle he had felt as though it had been stretched out, pounded flat, then thrown back together again, and he had a headache the likes of which made his few college benders look like a Sunday-school picnic.

His right hand fumbled with the visor release on his helmet, and the polarizing lenses promptly snapped up. "Ow!" he muttered, as he got a face-full of sunlight. "Computer" he croaked, "Full status report!"

The machine's voice was calm as ever. "\_Vehicle status: Landed and idle. Automatic landing procedure performed due to temporary incapacitation of pilot. Navigation, propulsion and weaponry all nominal. Fuel: Nominal. Warning: Primary and secondary GNSS signal loss, all bands. Rubidium backup clock nominal. Communication status: Primary and secondary commsat signal loss, otherwise nominal."\_

"Whoof" Sam muttered, as he pulled off the helmet and looked around at his landing spot. "'Incapacitation' indeed!" Although it was definitely a large beach, it looked nothing like the one he and Gerry had grounded the smuggler's craft on. "Computer, current position of Ranger fourteen and unidentified smuggler craft?"

There was a long pause, then: "\_No other craft in scanner range."\_

Sam snorted. "Like hell. Computer, scanner diagnostic." He reached down and touched the canopy release. The locks opened with a solid clunk and there was a hiss of equalizing air pressure as the clear dome retracted smoothly into the rear body of the craft. Sam took several deep breaths of air that were considerably fresher than he expected. Downright invigorating, in fact, if a bit on the cool side. Something teased at the edge of his mind, something just slightly \_wrong \_with the way the world looked...

Then he had it. It had been early evening, with a total eclipse looming. Now, the sun was clearly just rising. \_I must have been knocked out by whatever that ... thing ... was\_ he thought. \_But even if I was, Gerry should have pulled me out, and even if he didn't there should have been search craft out since I didn't report inâ€"\_

"\_Diagnostic complete. No faults detected" \_the computer said, startling him out of his reverie. Not willing to take the machine at its word, Sam put his helmet back on without strapping it, and keyed his transmitter. "Ranger fourteen, this is nineteen. Gerry, are you OK?"

No reply. Not even a noise burst. "Ranger fourteen, respond!" Sam called, more sharply. Still nothing. Grumbling, he changed to the pursuit channel and tried again. "Alladale base, Ranger nineteen."

It took Sam only a few minutes of switching through all the standard UNEC frequencies, and repeated calls, to get exactly what he had gotten on the intership channel: Nothing.

\_This is nuts!\_ he thought, as he pulled his helmet off once again and glared at the unresponsive communications panel. \_No GPS, no GLONASS, no GALILEO, no commsats... they can't \_all\_ go down at once!\_

A sudden inspiration hit him. "Computer, TLC tracker" he commanded. The screen obligingly changed, and he continued "Scan for any signature."

He waited nearly two minutes. The screen showed nothing more than the concentric range circles. Sam glanced up, saw several seagulls in the area, then looked back at the screen. It remained as blank as a freshly-formatted jump drive. \_No way!\_ He thought, by now thoroughly confused. \_At this range, I should see the signal from every bird on or above the beach, clear as day!\_ "Computer, confirm TLC scanner status?"

"\_TLC system nominal, no faults detected"\_ came the prompt reply.

"We'll see about that!" Sam muttered, as he pulled the chip-injector hypo from one of his jumpsuit's pockets. He reached his right hand over his left shoulder, held the hypo's tip against his scapular muscle, and pressed the trigger. A brief burst of cold and a slight sensation of pressure told him the tool had done its job, and he put it back in its pocket.

A second later, the signal from the chip flared up in bright yellow against the screen's dark-blue background, dead-center. Sam looked it over â€" yes, his own vitals were clearly displayed, along with the chip's unique serial number. But no others. \_And no GNSS coordinates!\_

A chill started to work its way down his spine. \_What in the name of sweet Saint Eligius is going on here?!\_ he thought.

Then it hit him. \_The eclipse! It must have started a bubble!\_

One of the less-understood atmospheric phenomena, in recent years, was the sudden appearance â€" and, usually, equally swift disappearance â€" of what physicists and meteorologists called 'Incongruity Bubbles' or simply IB's. These were areas of varying size, which could appear nearly anywhere on land or over water. They were nothing less than electromagnetic 'dead zones.' They acted like a Faraday Cage, damping out any kind of EM signal, communications and

GPS included. Even simple magnetic compasses spun in circles under their influence.

The best theories so far had fingered sudden changes in the solar wind, interacting with the earth's natural magnetic field, particularly over areas of water with a high mineral content. \_The Bermuda Triangle was a hotbed of the things for decades\_ Sam mused.

IB's also had a nasty tendency to expand or contract, seemingly at random. The best way to deal with one was simply to wait for it to dissipate. This could, Sam knew, take anywhere from five minutes to five days. There was no way of determining, from the earth's surface, how large an area had been affected without entering or leaving it. \_Gerry knows I was right there with him, and he will certainly have reported in long since\_ Sam thought. \_I'll just have to wait until the bubble clears, and I get my GPS back.\_

Then he heard the pulse of helicopter rotors.

Startled, he climbed out of the aircar and dropped to the sand, looking around for the craft. 'Copters weren't common these days, as they and most other types of aircraft had been replaced by the far more efficient TQ-drive vehicles, but a few were still in private hands. \_Mostly collectors\_ he thought, listening attentively as the sound got closer. \_Probably an old Huey, with that low a frequency...\_

Suddenly, from over the top of the high cliff to the west, two dark blots appeared, coming straight for him. Sam started to wave " then stopped, his right arm halfway in the air. Something about the approaching objects looked... wrong...

Puzzled now, he leaned back into the cabin and retrieved his binoculars. Selecting normal day vision, he focused them on the approaching pair.

He blinked. Hard. He pulled the viewer away from his eyes, rubbed them, and shook his head. Then he looked at the pair again and zoomed in.

It was no hallucination. The leftmost object had a near-cylindrical body, with four stubby but well-clawed legs held against its sides, and bore a mottled pattern of color in tans, grays, and blues. The body tapered sharply into a knobby tail, just behind the rear pair of legs. Two large, close-set, bright yellow eyes, jet-black pupils slitted vertically against the sun, roved back and forth as the creature flew slowly but smoothly along. Its wings were a hummingbird-like blur, and Sam suddenly realized their motion was the source of the pulsing noise.

Most astonishing, though, was what " or who " the creature had on its back. A portly youth, not much older than seventeen or so, dressed in a dark-brown shaggy-furred shirt and matching pants. The boots were leather, and bore a fringe of gray-black fur around their tops. The youth also wore a helmet, ridiculously small compared to his head, sporting a short pair of black-striped horns. Despite his obvious bulk, it didn't look like his mount was having the slightest trouble carrying him.

Sam swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly bone-dry. Hands trembling, he focused his lenses on the rightmost object. Despite his nervousness, he couldn't help but admire the other: A slender, jet-black body, with brilliant highlights of iridescent green along the spine and a handsome expanse of charcoal-gray spots everywhere else. \_Bit like a black leopard\_ he thought.

The eyes were phenomenal! Large, round, bright yellow-green, with the same black-slitted pupils as the other creature, they were set well forward in the spade-shaped head. He looked further back, noting the broad, six-fingered, bat-like wings, the two smaller quarter-fins just behind them, and the bifurcated tail fin, one black, one red with a white skull painted on it...

\_Red with a white WHAT?!\_

More curious than afraid now, Sam set the lenses for maximum zoom and looked again. Sure enough, the left rear tail fin was clearly man-made, two leather straps holding the framework supporting it to the creature's tail stock. He saw a couple of thin ropes leading from the fin and followed them forward to where they looped into an intricate pedal arrangement, the pedals being worked by the creature's rider.

Sam zoomed out slightly and focused on the black one's rider. Another youth, as slender as the other was portly, brunette haired with just a hint of red, and a scattering of freckles framing a clean-shaven face with eyes which shone a startling shade of emerald. He wore a green shirt, matching breeches, and a brown leather vest-like arrangement which, despite the decorative touch of a gold-colored disc of metal in the center, reminded Sam of his own craft's safety harness. His eyes widened once again as he saw the youth's left leg ended just below the knee, the remainder taking the form of a crude prosthetic of leather and metal.

His mind reeled. The binoculars dropped from his hand, and his knees went rubbery. He slumped down against the hull of his ship, still trying to assimilate what he had just seen. Suddenly, a clear memory of the morning's briefing flashed through his head, particularly of a certain color map bearing an elegantly-printed legend.

\_Here be Dragons!\_

"Whoa" Fishlegs murmured, eyeing the sleek but odd-looking craft with considerable interest. In shape, it resembled a cross between the letters 'U' and 'V.' It looked to be almost as long as a Monstrous Nightmare, and perhaps twice the width of a Gronckle. About a third of the way back from the rounded-off point of the nose, an oddly-shaped window rose up in a half-dome, while the back of the craft was squared off on either side with what looked like iron-mesh screens over two gaping holes. Three tapered fins stuck out from the top and sides of the craft, forming a triangle, and the top fin bore writing and markings on its side in a language the youth didn't recognize.

Its colors were equally fascinating: The top half was a dark blue-green, while the bottom was pure white. A narrow emerald-green stripe separated the two colors around the craft's middle, and it rested nearly the height of a man above the sand on three rectangular skids. "How did it get so far up the beach?" he called across to

Hiccup. "It looks way too big to drag, and there's no marks in the sand."

"I'm more curious as to how it got on the beach at all" came the reply. "Hoark swears he saw it flying!"

This drew a snort of laughter. "Fat chance" Fishlegs replied, with a grin. "It doesn't even have wings." Suddenly, he tensed and pointed. "Hey! Look! Whoever that is, they just collapsed! Maybe they need help!"

Hiccup had seen the same thing. "Down, Toothless!" he said, tilting his body slightly forward on the saddle. The Night Fury grunted assent, and dropped quickly towards the beach, Fishlegs and his Gronckle close behind.

Sam was a lot of things. 'Practical' was definitely on the list. Although a part of his overloaded mind continued screaming about the impossibility of what he'd just seen, not to mention the fact said impossibilities were now landing on the beach a few meters away, he shoved that part ruthlessly to a convenient corner and told it to shut the hell up.

He took a series of slow, deep breaths. The dizziness faded, and he managed to stand up more easily than he expected. \_I'm still alive, I'm here, and no matter what I may think, I believe the evidence of my own senses. Those are dragons, with human riders. Deal with it!\_

The two teens had stopped within speaking range, eyeing each other uncertainly. The slender one turned towards the vet and spoke what sounded like a question. Sam frowned. The language was vaguely familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. "Can you try again?" he said, in English. "I didn't understand."

The youth may not have understood the words, but he got the gist of the question. He spoke again, more slowly, and this time Sam got it. The lad was speaking Old Norse! Sam closed his eyes a moment, and muttered a hypnotic trigger word to himself.

All UNEC field agents were required to be at least bilingual, and he was no exception. In fact, hypno-learning had made him passably fluent in no fewer than six languages, though the technician administering the sessions had been utterly baffled as to why a field vet would want to speak Old Norse. Now, Sam thanked his patron saint he'd thought of it.

"That's better" he replied, haltingly. "Can you understand me now?"

The slender one's eyes lit up, while those of the portly youth widened in surprise. "Yes" the slender one replied. "I asked who you are, and if you need any help?"

"Doctor Sam Shay" he replied, cautiously offering a hand. The closest word in Norse for 'doctor' was 'healer,' but he barely stumbled over the word change. "United Nations Environment Corps, out of Alladale Base in Scotland." He decided diplomacy was better than clinging to titles. "Call me Sam."



The slender youth stepped forward confidently, and took Sam's hand in his own. His grip was a lot stronger than the vet would have believed. "Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third" he replied. "Son of Stoick the Vast." He let go of Sam's hand, and gestured to the black dragon. "That's Toothless, he's a Night Fury. Ever seen a dragon before?"

Sam had to grin at that. "Can't say as I have" he replied. "Just heard stories." He let his gaze roam over the black one again. The creature had curled up on the sand like a giant cat, and was watching the proceedings with considerable interest. "Magnificent!" Sam muttered. He was torn between a desire to examine both creatures close-up and natural caution about approaching a creature he'd never seen before.

Before he could decide, the portly youth stepped forward and offered his own well-fleshed hand. "Fishlegs Ingermann" he said. "Welcome to Berk." He nodded towards his own mount, who was sniffing curiously at the aircar's landing struts. "That's Meatlug. She's a Gronckle. Plus-eight jaw strength, six-shot limit, speedâ€"

"Fishlegs" Hiccup said, in a warning tone. The portly youth flushed, and let go of Sam's hand. "Oh... right. Sorry." He glanced over Sam's shoulder at the sleek aircar. "What kind of boat is that?" he asked.

Despite the difference in culture, Sam knew the look of a would-be tech when he saw it. "Make you a deal" he said. "You tell me where Berk is, in relation to Scotland, and I'll give you a tour."

Fishlegs nodded enthusiastically, and rattled off "Twelve days north of Hopeless, a bit south of Freezing to Death, and square on the Meridian of Misery." He nodded firmly, as if confident this explained everything.

Sam blinked. "Uhhh... could you put that into latitude and longitude, lad?"

Fishlegs looked pained. Hiccup laughed, and said "He needs a map." Fishlegs brightened. "Oh! Yeah! There's a big one in Mead Hall!"

"Mead Hall?" Sam asked. Hiccup nodded. "Sure. It's in the middle of our village. Just a few minutes away as a dragon flies." His gaze sharpened, suddenly. "Did you say you're a healer?"

Sam nodded. Some stray impulse made him add "for animals." He didn't bother trying to translate 'veterinarian' into Norse.

"Including dragons?" Hiccup asked, his tone hopeful.

The question caught Sam completely off guard. "I... I'm not sure." He gazed thoughtfully at the black dragon again â€" 'Toothless,' he'd called it. \_No, not 'it,' \_Sam quickly amended. \_'He.'\_ The intelligence in the dragon's yellow-green orbs was undeniable, even if the huge cranium hadn't been enough of a clue. He glanced over at the other dragon â€" a 'Gronckle,' Fishlegs had said. Meatlug's eyes didn't have quite the same power as Toothless's, but Sam could still see more than just 'animal' in them.

He knew he'd have to proceed carefully. Here were creatures with, at first glance, the intelligence of at least a wolf, possibly as high as a dolphin in Toothless's case. "As I said" he continued, tearing his gaze away and back to the teens, "yours are the first dragons I've ever seen. Do you have another that's sick?"

Hiccup's expression turned much older for a moment, his eyes reflecting a pain which Sam sensed as clearly as if the teen had shouted it out loud. "You... could say that" he said, slowly. "Actually, quite a few of them in the village are sick, and our healer can't understand why. None of the usual herbs or cures have worked."

Sam blinked at this. Folk medicine he thought, with an inward groan, though he was careful not to show any outward sign. No one's going to believe the report on this one.

The tightly-controlled panic and hope on the faces of both teens, coupled with the fact he still couldn't get hold of anyone or anything on the radio, convinced him. "I would be happy to help" he said, with a smile. "I can't promise anything, but I'll certainly try my best. How far away is your village?"

The relief on their expressions was just shy of comical. Hiccup pointed due west. "Just the other side of that cliff. We have some space in the harbor where you can tie up your boat."

Sam eyed the distance. It was at least five kilometers, over rough terrain, and the idea of hiking it with his equipment was unappealing at best. "Fair enough" he said, picking up his binoculars and stepping up to the small ladder protruding from the aircar's hull. "You lead, I'll follow."

He scrambled up the rest of the way, dropped into his seat, and slipped his helmet back on. No need to seal the canopy for this short a jaunt he thought, as he went quickly through the prestart checklist. It was only after he was reaching for the main drive switch that he realized the two youths were still on the ground, staring up at him like he'd completely lost it. "What's wrong?" he called down.

"Don't you have to put your boat in the water, first?" Fishlegs asked.

Sam grinned. There were still some isolated settlements, and the first practical use of the gravity-bending TQ field was only about forty-two years old. "Trust me" he said. "You and your beasties lead the way, I'll follow." He closed the main drive switch. The TQ generator purred promptly to life, accompanied by a whoosh from the propulsion turbines.

The teens both jumped back a pace, as startled by the noise as by the small clouds of sand blown away from the back of the craft. Meatlug came tearing out from under the landing gear, her short legs a blur and her eyes all pupil. She made a beeline for Fishlegs, who had to spend a few moments comforting the startled dragon.

Toothless's response was much calmer, but no less interested. He watched in apparent fascination, his head tilting from one side to

the other, as Sam advanced the 'Lift' throttle, and the craft rose smoothly into the air. He stopped the ascent at thirty meters AGL and hovered, waiting patiently for his escorts.

The two teens watched in open-mouthed astonishment as their visitor's craft lifted smoothly into the morning sky. "What in Thor's name is holding it up?!" Fishlegs muttered. Fright suddenly crossed his features. "Magic!"

"No, no magic" Hiccup replied, putting a hand on his companion's shoulder. He felt a twinge of fear as well, but it was quickly masked by fascination. "It's just a machine, Fish. Like a catapult or a wagon."

This drew a derisive snort. "Find me a catapult or wagon which can do \_that\_" he said, pointing straight at the hovering shape, "and I'll show you a Monstrous Nightmare who likes boiled cabbage!"

"No bet!" Hiccup said, with a chuckle, as he called to Toothless. "Let's go, bud!"

The Night Fury needed no further urging. He sprang up out of his curled position and bounded over. Fishlegs had already settled into place on Meatlug. The Gronckle, now back in her usual easy-going good humor, huffed impatiently as Fishlegs secured his safety straps. "You guide our visitor in, I'm going to go alert my dad and the village" Hiccup said. "Take it slow â€" I don't want anyone getting scared enough to take any potshots."

"On it!" Fishlegs called, as he gave Meatlug two taps on her right shoulder. The stocky dragon chuffed again, and her wings burst into their characteristic blur. Somewhat to her rider's surprise, Meatlug opted to take off going straight up, just as their visitor had. She stopped as she came level with the craft, then lurched forward into a lazy, weaving course which Fishlegs estimated would bring them to the village in about six minutes. Hiccup and Toothless were already nothing more than a dark blot far ahead.

'Observant' was another of Sam's basic traits. It didn't take a great deal of observing to know his escort was not flying in a direct course, nor at a particularly high speed. This puzzled him, until he reminded himself this was likely one of the isolated communities he'd thought of earlier, one which was clearly of Nordic descent and, as such, had held on to at least some traditions. Such places usually tried to keep their contact with modern technology to a minimum. Hiccup and Toothless, he assumed, had gone ahead to announce company was coming.

As he followed Fishlegs, Sam could clearly see their destination: A cluster of quaint but sturdy-looking wood-and-iron houses, set on the slopes of a hill above a natural half-circle of rock which formed a harbor. He whistled in amazement at the sight of the ships tied up to the piers. \_Viking Longboats!\_ he mused. \_Whoever's in charge of this place really has gone all-out in the realism department â€" those things must have cost a small mint to build!\_

As they drew closer, Sam was already formulating his game plan: Determine what the sickness was, clear it up, take preventive steps to avoid a repeat, determine \_where\_ he was, and fly back to Alladale. Assuming no serious complications, he didn't see why he

couldn't get back in time for dinner.

His thoughts turned to the odd names the teens had introduced themselves with. Odd, at least, until he remembered a bit of trivia about Viking culture: Children were often given bizarre-sounding names because their parents believed it would frighten off evil spirits. \_I wonder if those two have more normal names as well\_ he mused.

His escort suddenly turned a sharp right, heading for one house which stood apart from all the others at the top of a rise. Hiccup and his black companion had already landed, and Hiccup was conferring with a great bear of a man, red-haired, red-bearded and in full armor. \_Must be the chieftain\_ Sam thought.

Just before cresting the rise, his escort pointed at the house and flew off to the left, guiding his dragon to a somewhat bumpy landing. Sam circled once, noting the best spot to set down and trying to ignore the fact every eye in the village (dragon and human alike) was on him.

The feeling was mutual! He gazed around in amazement as he circled, marveling at the variety of dragons and the exquisite craftsmanship of each building. \_How in Saint Blaise's blessed bloomers could we have missed this settlement?! Especially one with so many unique species?! No one at Alladale knew, or they would have made sure I knew about it much sooner!\_

Still mulling the discrepancy, he guided his craft down to a soft landing on a flat grassy knoll next to the house. He shut everything down, hung his helmet on its holder, then climbed over the side and dropped to the grass.

The moment he hit the ground, a startled squawk, sounding like a cross between an annoyed macaw and a much-amplified lynx's purr, drew his attention downward. Sam froze, jaw dropping once again.

The creature peering at him from behind the nose-gear strut was about the size of a young Komodo monitor lizard, but much more brightly colored. Its body was a deep green on its back, shading paler towards its belly, with a series of interlocking red diamonds down its spine. The half-raised wings were coppery-red with brighter red streaks, the eyes a pale gold, and the well-defined claws on all four legs a milky white. Two tiny brown horns, spiraled like a goat's, poked out of the forehead.

The creature tilted its rounded triangle of a head to one side, eyeing the new arrival with an expression of cautious curiosity, and let loose a softer trill. The sound rose in pitch at the end.

Entranced, Sam slowly dropped to one knee. \_And dragons come in all sizes, too\_ he thought, remembering McCaffrey's fire-lizards. He extended one hand, palm out, and tried to match the creature's trilling noise.

His eyes bugged as the little creature promptly skittered closer, sniffed at his palm " and then shoved its head against his hand like a scaled green cat. Its entire body vibrated with the force of its purr as Sam tried a gentle scratching, and the double eyelids

closed halfway.

A stronger rumble, that of a large throat being cleared, broke the spell, much to the small dragon's disgust. Sam stood up, turned, and found himself facing a wall of armor and a huge red beard. Eyes the same deep blue as his own gazed impassively down from above the bulbous nose. Sam's nostrils twitched slightly at the mixed aromas of smoke, sweat, and well-tanned leather. The aura of authority the man radiated was so palpable it made the vet do a hasty examination of his conscience, and he gulped once.

A querulous chirp made him glance down. The tiny dragon had taken refuge right behind him, and was peering out nervously. He turned back to the one-man wall and thought \_Mother Machree and Saint James the Greater! What have I let myself in for now?!\_

### 3. Chapter 3

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 3\*\***

"\_Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health and welfare, the prevention and relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge.\_

"\_I will practice my profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics.\_

"\_I will teach my art to any who truly wish to learn it, to the best of my ability and in accordance with IVMA professional standards and UNEC regulations.\_

"\_I accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of my professional knowledge and competence."\_

(The Veterinarian's Oath, UNEC-specific revisions approved by the IVMA Executive Board and the UNEC Secretary-General, 2065)

Having to look up to meet anyone's eyes was a rare experience for Sam, and he was more than slightly taken aback. Before he could say a word, the human wall offered a hand the size of a small canned ham and said "Stoick the Vast, chief of this tribe and this island. My son tells me you are an animal healer?" He sounded surprised, as though he'd never heard of the occupation.

Sam nodded, wincing slightly at the bone-crusher of a handshake. He returned the grip as hard as he could. A Viking would see anything less than a best effort as a sign of weakness, even in a healer. "That I am, Chief Stoick" he replied, politely. "Doctor Sam Shay, United Nations Environment Corps."

The chief scowled. "Your speech is strange, Healer. What is the Unti... Unit-ed... what did you call it?"

Now it was Sam's turn to be puzzled. "United. Nations. Environment.

Corps." He said, again, slowly pronouncing each word in what he thought was the correct Norse translation. "You don't know of it? Or am I not speaking correctly?"

Before the chief could reply, Hiccup spoke up. "Ah, Dad?" Stoick glanced down at his son, as Hiccup nodded towards the house. "Heal now, details later? She's awfully sick..."

"Oh! Yes, of course. Healer, if you would follow us?"

"Please, call me Sam" he said, trailing along. As they walked, he wondered at the difference between the two. Although he could see some resemblance between father and son in bone structure, he would never have guessed they were related by blood.

Toothless was first through the door. As Sam was led in, and his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw why "and he gasped in admiration once again.

Stretched out in front of the firepit, atop a series of soft-furred throws, lay another Night Fury. Toothless was already stretched out right next to the other, one wing draped protectively over the unconscious form. "Let me guess" Sam said, softly. "Female? And mate to your Toothless?"

Hiccup nodded, his eyes brighter than Sam thought normal. "Night Furies are rare. They've been together only a couple of months... they got along from the moment they met, but she's still nervous around people. We call her Skye."

Sam nodded, hardly able to tear his eyes away from the pair. His first impression was the female's breathing seemed shallow and labored, compared to Toothless. "All right" he said, after a moment. "Let me get some instruments from my ship. I'll be right back."

He was out the door and running for the knoll before either Viking could so much as take a breath to reply. "Hiccup" his father rumbled, "do ye truly trust this stranger? He flies without wings. He dresses in ways I've never even \_heard \_of before! How do we know he's no' some sorcerer who will demand some crazy blood-price in exchange for his help? Assuming he can even do anything?!"

The boy sighed miserably. "What choice do we have, Dad? Our healer hasn't even been able to figure out what's wrong with her, let alone find a cure! I know it seems risky, but we have to at least let him \_try!\_ Skye's life, and her eggs, depend on it!"

His father gave him a penetrating stare, which he returned. "And yes" Hiccup continued. "I do trust him. I didn't mention this before, but Toothless didn't so much as growl at him when we were at the beach earlier. You know how rare that is! He doesn't usually accept a stranger anywhere near the house unless you or I invite them in \_and\_ introduce them."

Stoick held up both hands in surrender. "You're our dragon expert, son. If you're not worried, I won't worry." \_Yet.\_ "I've the fishing trip to see to" he continued, heading for the door. "I'll be back this afternoon."

Sam was coming back in just as Stoick went out. The chief nodded at

the healer, then went on his way. The vet's left arm was now enclosed in a gleaming white gauntlet which stretched to his elbow, black mesh material finer than the best chain-mail covering the fingers. His right hand supported a large bag over his shoulder, made of a slick-looking dark-blue material Hiccup had never seen. He started to walk towards the pair of dragons, moving slowly but deliberately.

He got within two meters before Toothless, up until now the picture of calm, leaped up and interposed himself between Sam and Skye. His pupils shrank to slits, his ear-flaps and neck-frills went flat, and every single one of his gleaming white teeth extended as a menacing growl erupted from his throat.

Sam was so startled, he stumbled backward, tripped over his own feet, and sat down hard. Fortunately, nothing broke, either in his body or his bag. "Whoa!" he said, eyes flicking back and forth between Hiccup and a most upset Night Fury. "What did I do?!"

Hiccup moved quickly, approaching the dragon with far more confidence than Sam thought was entirely warranted. Much to his surprise, though, Toothless showed not the slightest objection to the teen's presence. In fact, he calmed a bit, his pupils expanding as Hiccup stepped in next to his head and laid an arm across his neck. Those eyes, though, never wavered from Sam. "I'm not sure" Hiccup said, eyeing the vet's clothing. Suddenly, he pointed to a spot on Sam's duty belt. "Is that a knife?"

Sam looked down, saw where the pointing finger was aimed, then looked back up and nodded. "Yes, a standard hunting knife. Most of us carry oneâ€"

"As do we" Hiccup interrupted, with a knowing grin. "But Toothless won't accept one being so close until he knows you fairly well. You need to take it off."

Sam considered a moment, looked at Toothless again, then came to a decision. This is a unique situation he told himself as he settled on his knees, then slowly reached to his waist and unlocked the heavy belt. If that animal wanted me dead, I'd already be in two pieces. Working with careful but confident movements, he separated his gunbelt, placed it on the floor, and shoved it away with his foot. Looking straight at Toothless, hands out and empty palms forward, he said "No weapons."

Sam's eyes widened as the hostility in the dragon all but melted away as quickly as it had appeared. "Can... can he understand what I'm saying?!" Sam asked, hardly daring to believe the possibility.

Hiccup shrugged. "He seems to understand a lot of what we all say" he said, scratching the dragon gently behind one ear. "How much? Well, none of us know for certain. No, stay there for a moment" the teen added, as Sam started to get up. "On your knees is fine, but turn your head away. Look at the door instead. I'm going to introduce you two properly, so we won't have any more misunderstandings. Hold your right arm up, palm up and open, as if you were reaching for something, and don't look our way until I tell you."

Puzzled, and still slightly apprehensive, Sam did as he was directed. He closed his eyes, willing calm and practicing some basic breathing

exercises. After a few moments, the tension in his body slipped away. "That's perfect" Hiccup said. "Just stay like that."

He heard a shuffling noise, not unlike that of an elephant in a slow walk, then a gust of warm breath brushed his hand. "Sam, Toothless" he heard Hiccup say. "Toothless, Sam."

A smooth, leathery muzzle pushed firmly against his hand, and rested there. He could feel the twitch of facial muscles as the dragon's nostrils flared, taking in his scent. His fingers gently brushed over a line of small scales, right down the middle, hard but smooth. "OK, you can look now" Hiccup said, and there was more than a hint of a smile in his voice.

Sam opened his eyes and turned his head. "Sweet Mother Machree!" he breathed. Huge yellow-green eyes locked with his, less than a half-meter away, asking and answering a thousand half-formed questions in the space of a few seconds. Any doubts Sam might have had about the dragon's intelligence vanished like a blown-out candle.

Toothless suddenly emitted a noise, half-croon, half-grunt. It reminded Sam of a tiger's greeting 'chuff.' As quickly as that, he pulled away and settled back on his tail, his gaze moving rapidly between Sam and Skye.

Sam nodded. The message couldn't have been clearer if the dragon had roared it aloud. In English. "Don't worry" he said, bringing the Gauntlet around in front of him and powering it on. "I'll take good care of her."

For the next few minutes, Sam found himself lost in fascination at the readings he was getting from the female. \_The neural activity alone is phenomenal!\_ he mused, and he quickly discovered he'd been right about her labored breathing. \_Bronchial passages badly inflamed...\_ He didn't even notice Toothless watching his every move with an intensity normally reserved for prey.

Although it quickly became clear this was a warm-blooded reptile â€" the scan revealed that much right away â€" the species was still completely new to him. With the ease of long practice, he configured the Gauntlet for blood sampling, pulled a Vacutainer from one of his jumpsuit pockets and slipped it into the matching receptacle. It took only a few moments to find a primary vein at the base of the dragon's neck, and he soon had two Vacutainers filled with blood which shone a deep purplish-red in the dim light.

As he was about to put the containers in a protective case, a large black head appeared in front of him, sniffing curiously at the clear tubes. Sam held absolutely still, not knowing what to expect. A moment later, Toothless let out another grunt and swung his head over to examine his mate's neck closely. He sniffed again, pulled back, and looked back and forth between the tubes and Sam with an expression which clearly said \_What the...?!\_

Sam chuckled, wrote Skye's name on the tubes, then slipped them into their case "Has Toothless been sick at all?" He asked Hiccup.

"No, not even a sniffle" the youth replied. He had been watching the vet nearly as closely as Toothless. "How did you get her blood



without making a cut?" He asked, wonderingly. "And why did you even need it?"

Sam looked at the teen, puzzled. \_Don't they teach basic biology here?\_ he wondered. "The samples will give me a much clearer idea of what might be wrong with her" he explained, as he would to any observer. "No matter what she's got, I'll be able to tell once I run some tests on her blood." He got up and stretched, briefly. "Now, though, I need your help with Toothless."

"With Toothless?" Hiccup asked, puzzled. "Why? There's nothing wrong with him."

"Exactly" Sam replied. "Dragons are a completely new species to me, and I don't have any known-healthy readings to compare the ones from Skye against. Toothless's blood will give me that reference."

Hiccup looked worried. "I promise it won't hurt" Sam said, with a gentle smile. "In fact, he probably won't feel much of anything other than my hand."

The youth sighed resignedly. "All right, Hea... uh, Sam. If it'll help Skye. What do you need Toothless to do?"

Sam backed up another couple of paces, and indicated a clear patch of floor a little further away from the hearth. "If you could have him lie down flat, right hereâ€"

He stopped in mid-word, as the Night Fury calmly unfolded himself from his original position and resettled in the indicated spot. He looked up at Sam expectantly, with just a hint of smugness. Hiccup looked startled. "Odin's beard!" He muttered. "I have \_never\_ seen him that responsive to a newcomer before!"

The vet nodded. "I'm surprised, too." He looked straight at Toothless as he knelt down to start the exam. "Thank you" he said, still a little unsure of just how much the dragon understood. Toothless simply huffed and lay still.

The exam went just as smoothly, but Sam was having trouble working around the harness and ropes for the Night Fury's prosthetic tail fin. Hiccup muttered an apology and, with an amazingly small amount of maneuvering, got the gear off. He stacked it all neatly in a corner, then came back. As Sam got ready to draw blood, Hiccup stopped him. "Wait" the boy said, eyeing the Gauntlet with a mix of fear and fascination. "Can you... teach me how to get the blood?"

Sam sat back and regarded him with raised eyebrows. The Gauntlet was certainly simple enough to operate for such minor procedures, though it was capable of much more. "It's not that I don't trust you" Hiccup added, hastily. "It's... well... if you can find a cure for Skye, you're going to need help to treat the rest of the dragons, and they all trust me pretty much on sight. Not all of them are as easy to work with as Toothless."

If this had been any other youngster, Sam would have dismissed such a claim as sheer arrogance. However, there was something in those green eyes which told him it was simply a statement of fact. "Sure" he agreed, slipping off the Gauntlet and motioning for Hiccup to come

close. "Put this over your left arm... that's it... wiggle your fingers a bit..."

The instrument looked almost comically oversized on the teen's slender frame. He eyed it wonderingly, flexing his fingers every so often and studying the small glowing readout screen set into the upper arm. "What does the writing say?" he asked, pointing to the display. "I don't recognize the language."

Sam grinned. "I'll get to that later" he said, guiding Hiccup's hand to the same spot on Toothless's neck where he had taken the sample from Skye. "For this, you won't need it. Now, focus on your second finger, your longest. Ignore anything you might feel from the others. Use that finger to probe around this area until you feel a strong pulse. There will only be one spot where it's strongest."

After a few moments of probing, Hiccup's eyes went wide. "I think this is it!" he said, excitedly. Sam pressed his own fingers in near the spot and nodded approvingly. "Good! You're right on top of a big vein. Hold still, but don't tense up... relax! Just imagine your finger glued to that spot."

He reached into a pocket for another pair of Vacutainers, and handed the first one to Hiccup. "Push this in, colored end first, right here" he said, tapping the appropriate receptacle. "No, further in... it will resist at first, just keep pushing... there you go!"

The container popped neatly into place, and Sam pointed to a small button on the back of the 'hand' shell of the Gauntlet. It was glowing soft yellow. "Keep your finger still, and press that button" he said. "You'll feel some pressure pushing your finger back, but don't let it. Stay flat on that spot!"

His impromptu student fingered the button, then pressed it. It flashed yellow a few times, as the sterilization cycle ran, then turned steady green. Hiccup gasped softly as he felt the pressure Sam had described, and pushed against it. Toothless blinked, and tilted his head just far enough to study them with one eye. "You're both doing fine" the vet said. "Just hold that finger still."

Hiccup did so, his eyes widening in amazement as the Vacutainer filled up. "Now" Sam said, offering him the second one. "Pull that one loose, hand it to me, and press this one into position... yes, just like that... good!"

A few moments later, Sam had the two samples labeled and stashed in another part of the hard-case. "Now you can pull your finger away. You may feel a little resistance, but just pull steadily."

Hiccup did so. Toothless blinked again as Hiccup's finger left his neck, and Hiccup was quick to examine the spot. "I can't even tell there was ever a cut" he said, wonderingly, examining the second finger of the Gauntlet as well. "No blade, no metal at all..."

Finally, he looked up at Toothless. "Did that hurt at all, bud? Even a little?"

Toothless snorted and shook his head, watching both of them with a puzzled expression. He lifted up a foreleg and made a scratching

motion. "It just itched?" Hiccup said, reaching out to scratch the area he'd drawn the sample from. Toothless nodded, then purred softly as his rider found the exact spot, his tail quivering slightly. Sam's attention was quickly drawn to the missing tail fin. "Is it all right if I hold his tail a moment?" the vet asked, pointing to the still-intact fin. "I want to take a look at that old injury."

Hiccup nodded, still scratching. "Go ahead, but be careful. The scar is still sensitive in some places."

Sam nodded, then retrieved the Gauntlet from Hiccup's arm and moved down to where Toothless's tail had come to rest. Kneeling again, he carefully lifted the scarred end onto his legs. The dragon's tail-stock was much heavier than it looked, and he felt the powerful muscles twitch at his touch. "Relax, bud" he heard Hiccup say. "He's not going to hurt you."

The vet grinned. "Definitely not" he agreed, just as softly. "I think he'll let me know, in no uncertain terms, if I do something wrong."

He started by gently probing along the edges of the jagged scar, then did a deep scan with the Gauntlet. The display promptly showed a breakdown of the scar's pattern, inside and out, and Sam whistled softly in surprise at the stress lines. "How did he lose this fin?" he asked.

The teen sighed, and didn't answer right away. "It's... a long story, Sam." He seemed reluctant to say more. Suddenly, Toothless grunted and gently nuzzled his rider. His expression held not the slightest trace of upset. If anything, just the opposite. Hiccup smiled slightly, and said "Thanks, bud" before giving Sam the Reader's Digest version of the events leading to the pair's meeting and bonding.

Sam's eyes widened. "You're a matched pair" he said. "He can't fly well without your help, at the moment, and I would guess he helps you when you're walking around." He nodded at the youth's prosthetic leg. "No wonder you've got such a bond!"

Hiccup blushed slightly. "That's us" he said. "The village misfits." Then the vet's last few words registered fully, and his gaze sharpened. "Wait... What did you mean 'at the moment?'"

Sam gently placed Toothless's tail back on the floor, stood up, and walked over to show Hiccup the picture on the Gauntlet's display.

"See these lines here, here, here and here?" He said, pointing them out. "I compared them with the intact fin. They're new bones, lad! The rate of growth is slow, but steady." He smiled warmly. "Give it about a year or so, and Toothless is going to have a brand-new left fin!"

Hiccup's jaw dropped, and his eyes bugged. "A new... but how can you even see under his skin?!" He traced the lines with a forefinger, barely able to believe what he was seeing.

Sam chuckled. "I don't think Norse has words for it, but medical technology has come a long way in the past couple of decades. The

Gauntlet's scanner uses nanometer waves to show me what's going on inside." He gave the English pronunciation for 'nanometer waves.' Hiccup mouthed the odd words uncertainly. "The new fin's probably going to itch quite a bit as it's coming in, though" Sam continued, in Old Norse. "I'll give you some salve to help. And you'll need to make some adjustments to that artificial fin from time to time, so it doesn't damage the new growth."

He pulled the Gauntlet off, then set it next to his bag. Unzipping the top, he pulled out a white rectangular box about the size of a small briefcase, but thicker. The surface of the box bore the logo of Beckman Instruments, the legend 'PortaLab XL,' and the veterinarian's caduceus, all in royal blue printing. Sam released its latches, and the unit opened up clamshell-style. It took less than a minute to configure it for blood analyses and snap one of the Vacutainers from each of the Night Furies into place. The machine beeped and chirred to itself as it did its work, drawing curious looks from both Hiccup and Toothless.

Picking up the Gauntlet again, Sam started comparing the vital-sign readings from the two dragons. It didn't take him long to determine Skye was feverish, and had an elevated white-cell count. He frowned at the difference in nerve-impulse count and propagation, and asked "Has Skye had tremors? Any sign of her limbs shaking?"

Hiccup nodded. "Just before she passed out, last night, she was shivering pretty badly, all over, and her breathing was much rougher."

"Makes sense, given what I'm seeing here" the vet muttered. "How's her appetite? And what's their normal diet, anyway?"

"Fish" came the prompt response. "Almost any kind except eels. Mostly cod, some salmon and herring in season. And she hasn't wanted anything but water since last night. She and a lot of the other dragons started getting sick within a couple of hours after we fed them, but we all ate fish from the same catch and no one else got sick from it."

The seed of an idea took root in Sam's mind. "I'm guessing dragons eat their food raw, and you cook yours?" Hiccup nodded. "All right, then" Sam said. "Sounds like last night's dinner is a prime suspect. I'll have a much better idea as soon as the blood analysis finishes."

As if on cue, the PortaLab announced 'Analysis Complete' in a synthesized voice, and beeped. "Ah, good timing" Sam said, pulling the machine close and scrolling through the results.

As he did so, his eyebrows knitted in confusion. "Can't be right" he muttered. "Water's too cold here..."

He checked again, more carefully. The molecular diagram on the screen remained unchanged, as did its designation. Finally, Sam sat back on his heels and sighed. "The good news" he said, to an increasingly anxious Hiccup, "is I know what's wrong, and I can treat it."

"And the bad news?" the teen asked, nervously.

"I can't guarantee you won't run into this same problem in the

future" he said. "Especially if the dragons' diet includes clams, oysters or other shellfish." He turned back to his bag and started rummaging in his drug kit. "Skye's blood is showing signs of what's called Brevetoxin" he explained, as he mixed the contents of one ampoule with a couple of others and loaded an air hypo with the result.

"It's a naturally-occurring poison which comes from some types of algae blooms â€" you might know them as 'Red Tides' â€" but it's usually limited to warmer waters" he continued. "I don't understand how it happened this far north."

Hypo prepared, he moved back towards Skye. "What really puzzles me" he said, as he administered the injection into the same vein he'd gotten the blood sample from, "is why no one else got sick. Brevetoxin isn't affected by cooking, freezing, or any sort of preservation. If you and the dragons shared the same catch, you should all have gotten sick. No one else in the village has had nausea or vomiting, have they?"

Hiccup shook his head slowly. "Not that I know of" he said, then nodded to Skye. "What did you do to her?"

"Gave her a drug called CME-2" Sam said, sliding the hypo back into a jumpsuit pocket. "Cysteine Methyl Ester, specially formulated for animals. It's designed to treat different kinds of nerve poisoning, including Brevetoxin. She'll need another dose tonight, but I won't be at all surprised if she shows improvement before then, especially since I added an anti-inflammatory to help with her lungs."

Hiccup winced at the English words Sam spoke for the drug's full name, tried to duplicate it to himself, tried again with 'anti-inflammatory,' then gave up and settled for the first abbreviation. "What now?" he asked, as Toothless settled down next to Skye again and draped a wing over her.

"Now" Sam replied, folding up the analyzer and slipping on his Gauntlet again, "I need you to guide me around to the other dragons who are sick. I need to see if they have the same toxin, and I need to make sure the same treatment will work. By the way, are you serious about wanting to learn more of veterinaryâ€"ahh, animal healing?"

The youth nodded enthusiastically, his eyes wide. "Anything I can learn which could help the dragons, I want to learn!" He said, firmly.

Sam grinned. \_Was I ever that eager?\_ He wondered. "We'll make a good pair, then" he said. "I know almost nothing about dragons, other than what I've learned in the last few hours, so we can teach each other. I may have to teach you a bit of a new language, though. Deal?"

"Deal!" Hiccup replied, grabbing Sam's hand and shaking it. Then he looked around at the array of equipment. "Do you need me to carry anything?"

For answer, Sam closed the latches on the PortaLab's case, and handed it over. "This, for now. Not too heavy, is it?"

Hiccup accepted the case, gingerly at first, then with increasing confidence as he found its balance point. "Are you kidding?" He scoffed. "The hammer I use in the forge is heavier than this. Let's go!"

In a community such as Berk, Sam certainly expected the residents to be the practical, no-nonsense, survival-first type. This assumption, though fairly accurate, still did nothing to prepare him for his next meeting. Hiccup had led him to a house which featured, among other things, a fenced corral at its rear with a partly-open shelter to one side. A blue-scaled tail with bright yellow rings, studded with an impressive array of yellow, bronze, and coppery-red spines, protruded from the shelter's doorway. The sight riveted the vet's attention at once, and he started towards the shelter by sheer reflex, Hiccup's call of "Sam, wait...!" going utterly unheard.

In most cases, reflexes are a Good Thing. In this case, they nearly cost the vet his skull. A vibrant yell of \_"HAH!"\_ suddenly split the air. Sam snapped out of his spell long enough to see sunlight glittering off something headed straight for his face before Hiccup tackled him. The bright object sailed cleanly through the space his head had occupied seconds before, and buried itself in the trunk of a nearby redwood with a solid \_thunk!\_

The fall knocked the wind from both of them. As they got untangled, and back on their feet, they came face-to-face with the source of the yell. Another teen, very much female, slightly taller than Hiccup though nearly as slender, with golden-blond hair tied back in a neatly-braided ponytail and cobalt-blue eyes. She scowled at Hiccup as she retrieved what Sam suddenly realized was a huge double-bladed battle axe.

Any stereotypes he might have held about women in general, and Viking women in particular, were blown away like campfire smoke as she pulled the axe clear of the tree's trunk as easily as a clump of weeds out of a garden, flipped it around in front of her, and planted it into one of the thick logs supporting the fence with another \_thunk!\_.

She walked over to Hiccup, scowled at him again, then punched him firmly in one shoulder. \_"That's\_ for not calling out before coming into the line of fire!" she snapped. "Are you completely nuts?!"

He grinned ruefully, rubbing at his shoulder. "Hey, I was distracted! Anyway, it wasn't me you nearly hit, it was our visitor." He made hasty introductions. Astrid eyed Sam up and down with as much curiosity as suspicion. "He smells like day-old wolf" she said.

Sam cursed under his breath. He'd been so involved with everything else, he'd completely forgotten about changing clothes. Still, he sensed there was something more than just a casual comment on hygiene behind Astrid's words. Perhaps even an element of challenge.

He decided on the direct approach. "You would too, if you'd helped a mother wolf give birth less than a day ago" he said, returning her steady gaze. He had the satisfaction of seeing her eyes widen slightly. "All part of my job" he added, airily.

She held the stare a few moments more, then a slow smile spread across her face. "You'll have to tell me more about that" she said.

"But later. Can you help Stormfly? She hasn't been able to do much more than drink water since last night." She nodded towards the enclosure, her face suddenly betraying more than a hint of concern.

"That's what I'm here for" he replied. "But no more axe-throwing practice until I'm done. Deal?"

She chuckled. "Deal. Follow me."

As she led the way into the enclosure, Sam couldn't help whistling softly at the Nadder's brilliant colors. Royal blue gleamed over most of the dragon's upper body, shading smoothly to powder blue and pure white on her underside. The partly-open wings started with an outline stripe of coppery red, shaded to dark moss-green, and finished with irregular patches of bright yellow in the centers. A glistening ivory horn, reminiscent of a rhino, poked up from just above her nostrils, and a fringe of smaller horns surrounded the back of her head. "She's gorgeous" Sam said, gently laying a hand on the dragon's neck to gauge her temperature.

Unlike Skye, Stormfly was a little closer to consciousness. She twitched slightly at the vet's touch, then raised her head. One slightly glazed bright-yellow eye studied her visitor closely, followed by the other as she turned her head upside down. The posture reminded Sam so much of a curious bald eagle, he couldn't help but chuckle. "Hello, beautiful" he said, softly, holding out the same hand he'd touched her with.

She turned her head back over, and sniffed at the offered hand. A second later, she grumbled in apparent annoyance "and, much to everyone's surprise, planted her muzzle firmly against Sam's chest and shoved. Hard.

The vet let out a surprised "oof!" as he was lofted a good meter into the air. He bounced off the back wall of the enclosure, and slid to the straw-covered floor in an untidy heap, his eyes wide and more than a bit puzzled. "Wh... what the...?!" was all he managed to get out.

"Stormfly! Bad girl!" Astrid snapped. The Nadder simply snorted, and laid her head back down. "Sorry, Sam" Astrid said, as she offered him a hand up. "I think it's the wolf scent. She had a bad moment with a local pack this last winter, and she's been nervous about anything to do with wolves ever since."

Sam nodded uncertainly. "No harm done" he said. "Though I find it hard to believe any wolf in their right mind, pack or not, would dare bother her. Hiccup, I think you'd best get the blood samples" he continued, trading him the Gauntlet for the PortaLab and handing him a pair of fresh Vacutainers.

Astrid's gaze sharpened. "Wait... What, exactly, do you mean by 'blood samples?'" she asked, her eyes narrowing further as she watched Hiccup slide his arm into the Gauntlet. "And what, exactly, is that thing? Another of your crazy inventions?"

Unfazed by the jibe, Hiccup took her arm and guided her toward Stormfly. Sam backed off a bit farther, and started setting up the PortaLab. "Don't worry about it" he assured her with a grin. "We

already got samples from Toothless and Skye. He barely felt it, and she didn't even wake up."

"But you can't get blood without making a cut!" she insisted, still upset.

"That's what I thought, at first" he said, snapping the first Vacutainer into place as though he'd been doing it his whole life. "And no, this isn't one of my inventions. Are you kidding? Where would I get material like this?" He tapped the plastic shell making up much of the Gauntlet. "This belongs to Sam. He just showed me how to use it. Watch."

A few moments later, Astrid's eyes practically bugged out of her skull as the first container filled. Stormfly didn't even lift her head, though one eye stayed fixed on them during the entire process. As Hiccup finished, and pulled his hand away, he couldn't hold back a smug grin as Astrid tried "and failed" to find any sign her dragon's skin had even been broken. Still unsatisfied, she grabbed his wrist "the one still covered by the Gauntlet" and examined each finger, running a curious hand over the slick mesh.

Finally, she let go. "OK" she said, with a sigh. "I've got to admit, that was pretty amazing. But what do you do with those?" She gestured to the filled Vacutainers.

"That's where I come in" Sam said, relieving Hiccup of both Gauntlet and sample tubes. "Well done, lad" he added. "You'll make a fine vet-tech."

The analyzer produced the results Sam had half expected in its usual efficient manner. "Same symptoms, same toxin" he sighed, as he mixed another dose of CME-2, and reloaded the injector. "Astrid, I'm going to need to get close to her again, and I really wasn't built to fly. Can you keep her distracted?"

"Depends" she replied, eyeing the injector uncertainly. "Is what you need to do going to hurt?"

Sam chuckled. "Not a bit, lass. In fact, I'll be surprised if she even feels it, with that tough hide."

The two teens looked at each other. "I don't know if I want to take the chance..." Astrid began. Hiccup nodded, catching on immediately. "Jaw-spot. It's probably a good idea she get some sleep anyway..." He looked at Sam for confirmation.

"Absolutely" the vet agreed. "This kind of sickness takes a lot out of anyone, no matter if they wear scales or bare skin. But what's this 'jaw-spot?'"

They both grinned knowingly. "Watch and learn" Astrid said, as the two moved over near Stormfly's head. "You start with the neck" she said to Hiccup, "I'll do the rest."

Stormfly, who had been keeping a watchful eye on the group, snorted in irritation and twitched her well-armed tail as the two settled practically on top of her. It didn't take a mind reader to understand: \_Now what?! I feel horrible! Can't you just leave me alone?!\_



Irritation rapidly gave way to delight as Hiccup started scratching. \_Well, if you're going to do \_\_\*\*that...\*\*\_

"Good distraction" Sam said, wryly. He started to move closer, then stopped abruptly as Astrid held up one hand in warning. "Wait" she said, still grinning. "You haven't seen a thing yet."

As Hiccup continued working on the Nadder's neck, Astrid reached for a spot on the dragon's lower jaw line, almost directly below her eye. Sam's own jaw dropped in amazement as Stormfly let out an amazingly bird-like chirp, shivered all over and collapsed in a technicolor puddle, her eyes almost completely closed and one leg twitching erratically. "Do it" Astrid said to Sam, as she continued scratching gently at the spot.

The vet wasted no time. Astrid and Hiccup both watched as the hypo hissed softly against the same spot Hiccup had drawn blood from. The whole process took less than three seconds.

"I hope you can show our village healer how to do that" Astrid said, as Sam backed away. "It'd be a lot better than trying to swallow some of the concoctions she comes up with!" She made a face.

Hiccup nodded. "No arguments!" he agreed, emphatically. "I don't remember much from when I was recovering, after the battle with the Red Death, but do remember some sort of tea that tasted like the dragon pens smelled in mid-summer." He shivered in disgust.

"I'd be happy to talk with her" Sam replied, as he put the hypo away and secured the PortaLab. "In fact, I want to ask her about this outbreak, later on. But, as far as my practice goes, I'm not licensed to treat humans."

He got everything stowed away, looked up at the pair, and finally spoke his mind. "You know, you two, living in an isolated community doesn't mean you have to ignore everything the modern world has to offer. Your healer should have no trouble getting licensed to practice, locally, and the injector I'm using is the same one used by human doctors. They're not expensive, and readily available through any medical supply house."

As he finished, Sam braced himself for the reaction. \_It may sound like an insult\_ he mused, \_but these people really need to find a better balance between 'isolated' and 'tourist trap!\_'

The reaction turned out to be anything but what he expected. Astrid and Hiccup exchanged puzzled looks. "I got most of that" Hiccup said, uncertainly."

"Yeah" Astrid continued. "But what's a lyce... lys-ensse? All you need to be a healer is to apprentice to a master. Once the master thinks you're ready, you can work on your own."

Sam nodded, a bit uncertain himself. "That's pretty close" he said. "Where I come from, we have different 'masters' who teach healing. Some teach healing just for animals, others just for humans. There's so much work involved on either side, it's rare someone will learn both."

The pair thought this over, their hands still resting idly on Stormfly. The Nadder was snoring softly, oblivious to the entire discussion. "What did you mean by 'mott... modd-errn worrld?'" Astrid said, her expression still puzzled.

The question caught Sam off-guard. "What did I...? Why, it's... well..." he stammered, finally finishing with "The rest of the world, outside of Berk. Have you never been to the mainland?"

"Which one?" Hiccup said, raising both hands in a shrug. "There's at least three within a day or two sailing distance, more by dragonback."

"Not much to recommend some of them, though" Astrid put in, with another scowl. "Not everyone likes dragons."

Sam found himself as baffled as he'd been the entire day. "How could anyone" he said, half to himself, "not at least appreciate the beasties?!" Even as he spoke, a part of him — one he didn't really like listening to — reminded him human history was full of countless incidents of cruelty to animals of all kinds, in an infinite variety of forms. Those who felt a true bond with the animal world were not as common as he (and most of the rest of UNEC) would have liked

"If you find an answer to that" Hiccup said, "be sure and let us all know!"

Sam smiled as he gathered up his equipment. Hiccup took the hint, struggled to his feet, and picked up the PortaLab. "That I will, lad, that I will" the vet replied.

As they left the shelter, Astrid caught up with them and tried to take the PortaLab from Hiccup. "I can get it!" he complained.

"I know you can" she shot back, her eyes holding his. "The question is if you should." She eyed his prosthetic leg meaningfully.

He sighed. "You're getting to be as bad as Toothless! Astrid, if I act like I'm crippled, I become crippled. If Gobber can get around as well as he does, I can too!" He lengthened his stride, though Astrid could clearly see what it cost him.

Exasperated, she jumped in front of him and put a hand against his chest. He stopped, his expression a mixture of annoyance and pleading. "And if you keep pushing as hard as you have been" she said, "You'll lose more of that leg, and the ability to control Toothless's tail fin. Is that what you really want? Just to prove how tough you can be?"

He hesitated, his jaw set in a stubborn line. "Your leg is still healing\_" she reminded him. "Gobber's healed years ago. Give it time!\_"

Before he could argue further, she reached down and took the PortaLab. "And in that time" she continued, "let others help!" She turned around and started to walk away, looking over her shoulder at him expectantly.

If there was one thing Hiccup had learned, it was not to try arguing

with his girlfriend when she used 'The Look.' He started walking again, with nothing more than a resigned grumble. Suddenly, she transferred the PortaLab to her left hand and socked him in the shoulder with her right. He yelped, and complained "What was that for?!"

"That was for being too stubborn for your own good" she replied, sharply. Just as suddenly, she stepped in front of him again, put the PortaLab down, and wrapped him in a bone-crusher of a hug accompanied by a deep kiss. A rush of heat went through Hiccup's body, one which had nothing to do with the warmer-than-normal spring weather.

"Wow" he breathed, as she finally let go. "And that...?"

"Was for letting go of the same stubbornness" she said, smiling brightly.

She picked the PortaLab back up and continued towards Sam. He had halted a few paces ahead, seen what was going on, and respectfully given them some space. "I would ask if there was a problem" he said, as they caught up, eyeing them with a knowing smile. "But I think I'll stay out of it. Where to next?"

Astrid nodded approvingly. "You're pretty smart for someone who smells like overripe wolves" she quipped, then turned to her companion. "Hiccup?"

"Spitelout's house" he replied, without hesitation. "You'll see two opposites in size, there, Sam; a Terrible Terror and a Monstrous Nightmare."

The vet winced. "I hope they look better than they sound" he muttered.

#### 4. Chapter 4

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

##### Chapter 4

"\_When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth"\_ (Sherlock Holmes, 'The Sign of the Four').

(1-Mar-840 AD, 11:00-17:00 UTC)

Sam's worries about dragon appearance versus names were quickly put to rest. He discovered the Terror to be the near-twin of the Komodo-sized dragon which had been attracted to him earlier, though Spitelout's was nearly all green with just a few coppery highlights. The little female responded very quickly to treatment, going from glassy-eyed and lethargic to a burst of puppy-like energy within an hour after Sam had administered the antitoxin.

The burst lasted long enough for her to announce to everyone how much better she was feeling. She did this mainly by scampering up one person and down another, chittering happily along the way. She continued by gulping down three good-sized herring (after Sam had checked them for infection and pronounced them clean), letting out a

most unladylike belch, and flying up to the roof of the house for a sunlit nap.

"Excellent work, healer!" Spitelout said, with a huge grin, as he delivered a friendly clap to Sam's back which nearly knocked him over. "If ye can do as well with my son's beast, 'twill truly be a miracle!"

"I'll certainly do my best" Sam said, a little overwhelmed by the burly Viking's rough-and-tumble manner. "Since that was your Terrible Terror, I assume your son's friend is a Monstrous Nightmare?"

Spitelout nodded. "Aye, and a huge one at that! Come with me."

He led the way to the backside of the house, towards a shelter which, in form, was the twin of the one behind the Hoffersons. But bigger. Much bigger.

Sam soon discovered why. The sleeping Nightmare was about the size of an old LearJet. Two-legged, like the Nadders, but a deep scarlet in overall color, with highlights of brown and gold and a wingspan which Sam guessed at just under twenty meters.

"Sweet Saint Blaise!" he gasped. "How in Creation does a beastie that size get around on only two legs?!"

A slightly shorter version of Spitelout, dressed in black leather with fur linings, got up from where he'd been dozing near the dragon's head and came forward for introductions. Sam tried hard to suppress a chuckle as the youth was introduced as Snotlout, and the dragon as Hookfang.

When he repeated his question, Snotlout led him closer and pointed out a very tough-looking articulated claw at the wing's wrist joint. "He braces himself on these while he's on the ground, and he can climb like a squirrel with 'em as well" the youth said, sounding very proud.

Sam tried to imagine the huge form actually climbing a tree, squirrel-fashion. He failed, miserably. "That's something I'd like to see" he said, as he switched on the Gauntlet and started scanning. Of particular concern was the dragon's body mass reading. He winced at the numbers, then said "I can give him the first dose of medicine, but I'll have to return to my base for more before I can give him the second."

"Does that mean Skye has to wait for her second dose, too?" Hiccup asked, worriedly.

Sam shook his head as he mixed the requisite amount and loaded it into an injector much larger than what he'd used earlier. "No, I figured on holding out enough for her already, since she's pregnant. If I'm counting right, there are six more dragons to go?"

Hiccup nodded. "Two Gronckles, three more Nadders, and one Zippleback. The Zipplebacks are the biggest, about the same size as Hookfang, and they've got two heads... is that going to cause a problem?"

"Not likely. I'll bring back some extra, just in case...TWO HEADS?!" He was so startled, he nearly dropped the injector. "Hiccup, lad, tell me you're joking?!"

The teen shook his head. "Not at all. You've never seen a Zippleback? Granted, they're the only two-headed dragon we know of, but they're still pretty common."

Sam could only ponder the strangeness and wonder of it all. Common he thought, bemusedly, as he administered the large dose to Hookfang. The hypo took nearly ten seconds to empty itself. Other than a faint rumble, and a slight twitch of his tail, the only reaction was the steady whoosh of the dragon's breathing.

"That's it for now" Sam said, as he started packing up. "I'll go get supplies, and be back here as quick as I can. Astrid and Snotlout, stay with your dragons for at least the next couple of hours, or arrange for someone to do so if you can't. Have food and water ready, as they're likely to want both when they wake up. Don't use any fish from last night's catch, even if you've eaten from it yourselves!"

They all agreed. Snotlout went back to his spot by Hookfang's head. Astrid, after exchanging a few words with Hiccup Sam didn't catch, took off running for her own house.

Hiccup, remembering Sam's earlier request, guided the vet up to Mead Hall. This time, Sam carried the PortaLab and gave Hiccup his lighter bag, much to the youth's ill-concealed disgust.

"Astrid has a good point, lad" he said as they walked along, proving he'd heard more than a hint of what had been going on earlier. "An injury like that takes time and care to heal. There's no shame in giving it both." He didn't bother pointing out the existence of modern prosthetics, ones which could practically emulate an entire leg if necessary. Euro-Basic insurance doesn't allow for something that expensive\_ he reminded himself.

Despite his need to leave, he couldn't resist staring around Mead Hall's interior in unconcealed wonder. His gaze wandered from the huge central firepit up to the vaulted ceiling, barely visible in the dim light, then back down to take in the sturdy trestle-style tables. Huge round wooden pillars, their surfaces covered with equally huge but intricate carvings and runes, helped support that impossibly high roof.

He couldn't begin to guess how much it had cost to build, though he was fairly sure it had been more than he made in two years. But, even with the enormous echo-prone interior, it had the same hominess to it as his brother's pub. It even bore some of the same smells, though mead and some sort of strong ale were dominant. He looked over at Hiccup, who was smiling slightly. "Yeah" he said. "Has that effect on everyone the first time they see it."

Sam nodded, then took a closer look at some of the carvings and hangings, and frowned. "Your people really were at war with the dragons, from the looks of these." He gestured to the pillar he'd been studying.

Hiccup nodded, sadly. "Three hundred years of senseless battle" he

said, softly, his voice suddenly sounding much older. "And all that time, it was because of one overgrown dragon controlling them all." He sighed, went over to a rack full of rolls of what looked to Sam like deer hide, selected one and brought it over to an empty table, beckoning for the vet to have a seat on the opposite side. "They never raided us because they wanted to. They're perfectly capable of gathering their own food and most of them are fish-eaters, as you've seen."

Sam barely heard the rest of the explanation. His mind was still stuck on 'Three hundred years.' He wondered again how this tiny community, and several completely new species, could have gone utterly unnoticed and unvisited by an increasingly 'wired' world. "With that kind of history" he said, finally, "I would guess not everyone has accepted the changes you and Toothless helped start? Nice job, by the way."

This produced a small grin as Hiccup unrolled the map. He flipped it around before it was fully open (it covered over half the table), so it would be right-side up from the vet's position.

"Thanks. And yes, that would be a good guess" he said. "We've had about a dozen people leave Berk because of the change. Said they just couldn't deal with the idea of 'those horrid beasts' as friends. It was mostly older families, who'd lost relatives to dragon raids before I was born."

He put a finger on an outline in the middle of the drawing. "This is Berk, north is towards me, south towards you, and I'm sure you can figure out east and west from there."

Sam could and did, though he was puzzled by the map's scale. He soon realized it was done in vikas, with one vika being about the same as one mile under the old Base-12 system the United States used before going metric in 2040. Equally puzzling, though not so easily worked around, was how roughly the mainland outlines were drawn and how few towns and cities had been properly labeled.

Rand McNally would be horrified he thought, as he pulled out a pocket ruler and mechanical pencil and started measuring distances. And why thin leather when there's no shortage of paper?

He pushed the thought aside for the moment, traced a couple of thin lines between Berk and the other land masses, put down tick-marks for distances and studied the result. "I really got thrown off course" he muttered, and pointed to what he was fairly sure was the southeast tip of the Shetlands.

"I started here, last evening, about three hundred sixty kilom... I mean, two hundred twenty or so vikas southwest. My normal base is here..." He pointed to Scotland, in the highlands southwest of Dornoch, "...but that's over three hundred vikas away. Even at top speed, it would take me a couple of hours to get there and back, and that's assuming I don't get a lot of grief about pulling that much in the way of supplies."

Hiccup gasped. "You can cover three hundred vikas in an hour?! You're pulling my leg, Sam! Nothing can go that fast, not even Toothless in a panic! Even if you could, it'd kill you! Suck the breath right out of your body!"

"Didn't I say earlier the modern world had some neat things to offer?" Sam replied, with a grin. "My ship can go that fast, and more if I have to, without harming so much as a hair on my head. But, I don't want to take that much time to resupply. There's another base just northeast of Bergen, in Norway. If I'm reading this right, that's only about thirty-five \_vikas \_northeast of here."

He pulled out a notepad, and started writing down lines of numbers and symbols which Hiccup, for all his skills, couldn't make head or tail of. "Even without GNSS" Sam muttered, more to himself than his host, "I have a backup navigation system. I just need to verify its programming before I try using it."

"What's Gee... what did you call it?" Hiccup asked, as puzzled as he'd ever been

"Stands for 'Global Navigation Satellite System" Sam replied, without looking up from his scribbling. "Thirty satellites, all in various orbits around the planet. Each one transmits a unique signal. You need at least three for a basic fix, four if you want altitude as well. Fortunately, most receivers pick up at least eight at a timeâ€"

He stopped scribbling and looked up. Hiccup's expression was a mix of bafflement and concern. "I'll... take your word for it" he said, slowly. "Honestly, Sam, I barely got two words of what you just said."

Sam sighed and put down his pencil. "I'm sorry, lad. I tend to forget myself sometimes, especially when I'm visiting somewhere new. Tell you what... It's much easier, in cases like this, to show someone than it is to try and explain. How about coming with me? We shouldn't be gone more than a couple of hours."

Hiccup's eyes widened. Sam was sure he saw both eagerness and doubt in that green gaze. "Go with you? Wow... Sam, I'd like to, but... are you really sure it's safe to go as fast as you said? And what about Toothless and Skye?"

The vet laughed. "If going as fast as I said was as deadly as you think, I wouldn't be here right now. Besides, I won't need to go anywhere near top speed to get back and forth to Bergen in good time."

He rolled the map up, handed it back to Hiccup, then stood up and stretched. "As for your two dragons, let's go see how they're doing and you can decide from there."

The pair got ample evidence of Toothless's continued health before they were halfway up the hill to Hiccup's home. The dragon met them in mid-climb, half-running and half-flying down the slope, accompanied by frantic cries of "Night Fury! Get down!" from several startled villagers.

His antics, if anything, became even more energetic as he charged towards Hiccup and Sam. He turned at the last moment and started bouncing around the pair like a huge black-scaled puppy, his eyes nearly all pupil and every neck frill he had sticking straight out. "Whoa! Easy, Toothless!" Hiccup said, setting down the vet's bag.

"What's up, bud?" he continued, holding out a hand. "Is everything OK?"

The Night Fury, by way of reply, darted forward with open mouth (and fully-retracted teeth, Sam noticed with some relief), took hold of his rider's hand and started backing towards the house. "Yeah, I get it, pal! We were heading that way already..."

Just as suddenly, Toothless released Hiccup and, before Sam could so much as gasp, repeated the process with him. Sam gulped as a set of warm, damp gums closed on his hand, firmly but painlessly, and pulled. "Yes, yes, I get the idea!" he said, then looked over helplessly at Hiccup. "Do you think he wants us to hurry?"

Hurry they did, as best they could given Hiccup's awkward pace, with the hyperactive Night Fury positively dancing around them all the way. He even held the door open, making a series of sharp grunts and gesturing inside with his head. Neither vet nor Viking knew whether to celebrate or panic.

Fortunately, it turned out to be the former. Sam stopped in his tracks just inside the door, Hiccup barely a heartbeat behind. "Saints be praised!" Sam murmured, as he put down the PortaLab.

The vet's world narrowed to a single form, reclining comfortably in front of the hearth and watching the door with an alert but calm expression. Skye's eyes, unlike her mate, shown silvery-gray in the dim light, minute specks of iridescent blue, green, gold and red flashing in their depths. The sparks shifted position and color as she turned her head slightly, eyeing the new arrivals with quiet dignity. Her breathing was much deeper and easier, without a trace of its former raspiness.

Like a man in a trance, Sam slowly made his way towards her. Rainbow-flecked eyes held his, seemed to look straight into his core...

The spell was abruptly broken as Toothless trotted into the room, brushed past Sam as if he weren't even there, and went nose-to-nose with Skye. They nuzzled each other for a moment, then Skye huffed questioningly at him and gestured towards Sam with her head. Toothless replied with a short series of modulated grunts.

Those opaline eyes swung back to Sam, holding his gaze again. He did his best not to fidget, nor to stare directly back, for he got the distinct impression he was being measured against some standard he couldn't even guess at.

Hiccup moved quietly behind him, setting down the vet's equipment bag and walking awkwardly over to lean against Toothless's side. He took a breath to speak, but was silenced by a single look from the Night Fury.

A few moments later, Skye nodded slightly, then got up on all fours and chuffed at Toothless again. He dipped his head once, then started moving towards Sam. Hiccup moved with him, wearing a thoroughly confused look. "What's happening, lad?" Sam asked, softly.

"No idea" Hiccup replied. His gaze bounced between Skye, who hadn't moved a millimeter since standing up, and Toothless, who was still



closing silently on Sam. "Best advice I can give, for now: Just hold still!"

It took every bit of Sam's considerable nerve to do so, as the Night Fury opened his mouth once again. Though he was relieved to see the dragon's teeth were retracted, he couldn't help wincing as the powerful jaws closed firmly over most of his right hand, though not enough to hurt. He followed along as the dragon went into reverse, guiding him towards the same spot where Hiccup had first introduced them.

Toothless stopped, and Sam was nearly thrown off-balance as he tugged downward. He guessed what the Night Fury had in mind, and knelt in the same position he'd used before. Toothless let go, huffed approvingly, and backed away another couple of paces. Sam closed his eyes, held out his right hand towards Skye, and waited.

Once again, a soft but heavy shuffling, like a small elephant's footsteps. Once again, warm breath brushed his fingers. Finally, a leathery, lightly-scaled muzzle pressed itself against his hand. "Skye, Sam" he heard Hiccup say, softly. "Sam, Skye."

The vet took a deep breath, opened his eyes, and turned to meet her gaze. A shock ran through him as he did. While the impression he'd gotten from Toothless had certainly been one of immense, tightly-controlled power, intelligence, and dignity, Skye projected all of it and more. An impression of vast experience and responsibility, but practically nothing of arrogance. Here was a born leader, yes, but one who expected and encouraged those under her command to push themselves to be the best they could. His mind somehow managed to process it all and produce a single word: Royalty.

He bowed his head. "Lady Skye" he said, softly. "I am honored to meet you."

It was the right response. Skye pulled back, studied him a moment more "€" and stunned everyone in the room by extending her head once again, bottom jaw towards Sam, eyeing him expectantly. He blinked, then slowly reached out a hand to scratch along her jaw line. Her eyes half-lidded, and a soft rumble resounded in the still air.

Sam's focus narrowed as he relaxed. The rest of the world just didn't seem too important right now. He wasn't sure how long it lasted, but Skye suddenly took a deep breath, pulled her head back to a normal position, and settled back down. Her gaze wandered to the others as Sam stood up, and he couldn't help but notice a subtle tremor in her neck.

Hiccup couldn't hold back a laugh. "What, lad?" Sam asked.

"You should see yourself!" he said, still chuckling. Puzzled, Sam looked around for a mirror, saw the next best thing in a polished shield hanging on a nearby wall, and went over to look at his reflection. His face was more haggard than he'd expected, but lit with what had to be the most vapid grin he'd worn since high school.

For just a moment, he was embarrassed. The moment fled quickly, and

he relaxed. "Is that all?" he said, turning back to the others. "And I suppose you kept a perfectly straight face the first time you and Toothless touched?"

Toothless let out a short series of huffs at this. Hiccup blushed. "Well..."

"Case closed" Sam said, wryly. He reached into a leg pocket and pulled out the small

injector he'd loaded earlier. "I'd best give her that second dose. She still seems a bit unstable." He moved towards Skye once again. "I need to give you more medicine" he said as he drew close, holding out the injector so she could see it clearly. "It won't hurt."

She eyed it curiously, sniffed at it, then glanced at Toothless. He gave a single huff. Skye turned back towards Sam, nodded once, then held still, her neck extended and one silvery eye fixed on him. She blinked as the hypo hissed against her skin, then craned her head around to sniff curiously at the spot. She licked at it a couple of times, shrugged her wings, then settled into a sphinx-like pose, still eyeing Sam speculatively. "Thank you" he said, nodding once and turning away.

"Nay, Healer, thank you" came a gruff voice from the front door. Stoick was back, looking tired but pleased. "Spitelout told me how ye cured Sparks and Hookfang. 'Tis nothing short of a miracle ye've brought us, even if your ways are strange enough to puzzle the Gods themselves." He looked over the pair of Night Furies, settled next to each other in the same position, and nodded appreciatively. "And I can see ye did the same for this pair o' devils."

He hung his helmet on a hook near the door, got a jug of mead from the kitchen and three mugs, and settled at the dining table. "Come have a drink and tell me how ye did it" he said, gesturing them over.

Sam nodded acceptance. "Before I do, Chief Stoick" he said, plucking at the front of his jumpsuit with distaste, "I'd like to take a moment to put my equipment away and put on fresh clothes. I'll be right back."

He gathered up kit bag, PortaLab and Gauntlet, and went out. Once he was clear of the door, Stoick handed Hiccup a mug and said "So... tell me what ye think of our visitor, son."

Hiccup knew his father well enough to see the depth of the question, and he was more than a little startled. "You actually want my impressions?"

Stoick snorted. It sounded like a small thundercloud. "Wouldna' have asked you if I didn't" he said, peevishly. "Just tell me what ye think."

Hiccup took a gulp of mead before starting. He was surprised to find it didn't take that long to cover the basic facts, mostly because he and Sam hadn't spoken very much about his background. Stoick's eyes widened when Hiccup told him about learning to take blood, and what the vet had done with samples. "I guess, in the end, he's helping because it really is just his job."

"Aye, and that's what worries me" Stoick sighed. "A job means pay, and that makes me wonder who might be payin' him, and what they might be payin' him to do. You've seen for yourself how strange his ways are. And those tools he uses! They're like magic from the Gods!"

Hiccup looked disgusted. "Oh, come on, dad! You think he's a spy or something? Did it ever occur to you he might actually be getting paid just to be an animal healer? And as for his tools, there's plenty of land we haven't explored yet. Thor only knows what other people are coming up with these days!"

His father looked unconvinced. "OK, let's take this from another angle" Hiccup said, taking another gulp from his mug. "You already know dragons are pretty good at sizing someone up? Wait 'til you hear how Skye reacted to him."

He went on to describe precisely how the Night Fury had responded. "You know as well as I do a dragon's neck is their most vulnerable spot. They absolutely do not present it to someone they don't trust, and I've never seen a dragon offer their neck like that to anyone on the first meeting! Toothless didn't do it with me, and Skye's the most stand-offish dragon Berk has ever seen. Helfires, Sam got more out of her in five minutes than I've been able to in five weeks! That says something, no matter what."

Stoick thought this over. At that moment, Sam came back in, a bundle of clothing tucked beneath one arm. "Be right there" he said, ducking behind the stairs where he had pushed his gunbelt away earlier. Ripping and shuffling sounds ensued for about two minutes, then the vet reappeared. His hair looked freshly combed, his gunbelt was back around his waist, and he had a small but bulging bag in one hand. He set it down by the door, then came over to collect the remaining mug. "Thanks" he said, sampling the brew.

The dominant flavor was that of mead, but it came with traces of mint and a sharp flavor he thought might be either clove or ginger. It was also strong enough to light a small fire in his stomach, one which spread its heat quickly through the rest of him. "Strong stuff!" he said, appreciatively. "Thanks, but I'd best not drink more than that. Still have to fly tonight."

"You're leaving?" Stoick said, puzzled. "But some o' the beasties are still sick."

Sam explained about the supply issue. "I've invited Hiccup to come with me, if he wants to" he added. "He's turning into a fine assistant, and we wouldn't be gone more than a couple of hours."

Once again, Sam got a reaction he hardly expected. Not from Hiccup, but from Stoick. The chieftain scowled, put his mug down harder than seemed necessary, took hold of his son's arm and said "A moment, if you please, Healer?"

The vet just nodded, baffled by his host's reaction. Stoick promptly walked Hiccup over to a corner near the stairs, and started arguing with him. Although they kept their voices low, Sam couldn't help but overhear scattered words, mainly variations on "crazy contraption"

and "dark sorcery" from Stoick's side. He also picked up "...must go, at least go with Toothless..."

Hiccup countered with something Sam didn't catch, and Stoick snapped a reply. Hiccup came back right on top of it with "...not a baby any more... expect me to lead, how am I supposed to learn if you..."

The teen was clearly used to this, for he gave as well as he got. Sam caught fragments of reassurances about the time involved for the trip, as well as something else he hadn't expected. "...trade opportunities, Dad! If we can trade for some of the instruments..."

The rest was in too low a voice for him to pick up accurately, but he rolled his eyes. Follow the money he mused. I wonder how First Euro National would react to banking Viking handcrafts?

He risked a glance. From Stoick's deepening scowl, Sam guessed Hiccup was winning. Finally, Stoick nodded in defeat, and they both came back to the table. "Hiccup is free to go with you, Healer. But I want to see you both back here as quickly as possible!" He slammed a meaty fist to the table, hard enough to make the mugs jump. "Clear?"

What the frell is he so worried about?! Sam wondered, though he nodded and replied "Very clear, Chief Stoick, and I thank you. We won't linger a moment longer than we have to." He suddenly had the odd sensation of being a teen himself, assuring his father he'd get his first date home right on time.

Stoick nodded, and his scowl melted away. He offered a handshake, which Sam accepted. He wondered afterward if he'd have bruises. "Odin guide you both, then. I'm going over to Mead Hall with Gobber."

He turned and lumbered out without another word, picking up his helmet on the way. Sam and Hiccup exchanged a look. "Would you mind telling me what that was all about?"

Hiccup shrugged, and managed a weak grin. "Overly protective?" he offered.

Sam knew better than to push in a situation like this, and he was too wrung out to argue in any case. "Fair enough" he said, reaching for his laundry bag. "Do you need to bring anything with you?"

Another shrug. "I'm wearing it all. Give me just a minute, though."

He made his way over to Toothless, who was keeping watch over a now-sleeping Skye. "I'll be back in a couple of hours, bud" he said, scratching his friend's neck. "You keep an eye on her, OK?"

He grinned as he said it. Toothless chuffed a couple of times, in what Sam now recognized as his version of laughter, and nudged Hiccup in the chest. Go the motion said. I'll be here.

They made their way out to Sam's ship. "Up the ladder with you, lad" Sam said, cheerfully, as he stowed his laundry in one of the cargo compartments. "Take the right-hand seat."

Despite his artificial leg, Hiccup scrambled up the ladder like a

howler monkey on a double latte. Just as he reached the top, he froze. "Uhh... Sam?"

The vet closed the compartment, and came forward to stand under the ladder. "Something wrong?"

"I'm not sure wrong is the right word" Hiccup said, clearly trying hard not to laugh. "Safe to say my seat's already been claimed."

Puzzled, Sam clambered up the other side. As his head came above cockpit level, he saw the problem immediately. It took the form of the green-and-red Terror he'd met just after landing in the village, sprawled on the front passenger seat and snoring softly. From the coloring, and questions he'd asked Hiccup earlier about draconic anatomy, this was definitely a female. Her legs and tail twitched slightly, reacting to whatever dream was playing across her mind's eye.

The vet rolled his eyes. "This is what I get for leaving the canopy open" he muttered. Then, to Hiccup, "So how do I wake her up? Gently?"

"Better let me do it" he replied. Sam nodded, and traded places with the teen. This time, Hiccup scrambled all the way in, leaning most of his weight on the left seat. He reached over and, cautiously, tapped the Terror on her muzzle. She stirred, flipped all the way onto her back, legs in the air "and kept right on snoring.

"Oh, great" Hiccup muttered. He tried the muzzle tap again, a little harder, but with a net result of zero. "OK, fine," he sighed. "Heavy weapons it is..."

He sat back in the seat, keeping his face well clear of the Terror's area, and reached into an inside pocket of his vest. He drew out a very long and very stiff black feather he'd salvaged from the beach a couple of days ago. He wasn't sure what kind of bird it was from, but such details were unimportant for his purposes.

Reaching back over the cockpit's center console, he started tickling the Terror's muzzle with the feather's tip. She shivered, briefly, then her eyes sprang wide open. Her entire body seemed to grow with her sudden sharp intake of breath, and deflated just as abruptly as she sneezed. Violently.

The resultant fire-jet missed Sam by mere centimeters. Hiccup heard him shout a single word as he leaped clear and, though he didn't recognize the language, he doubted it would have been suitable for polite company.

A moment later, the vet was back on the ladder, looking at him with concern. "Are you all right, lad?"

He grinned broadly in response. "Sure. That's just what happens when you startle a Terror. Normally, they don't let loose fire when they sneeze, but if they're startled and about to sneeze..."

Sam did his best to absorb this as the indignant dragon glared at them both. With a sharp chirp, she scrambled up Sam's front and launched herself off his shoulder. He winced as her claws dug in,

briefly, and turned to watch as she flew off towards the forest. "Now I really have seen it all" he said. "Move over, lad."

Hiccup did so, settling into the passenger seat. "I take it the other dragons can breathe fire as well?" Sam asked, only half-joking, as he slid into his own position and secured his harness.

"Sure can" Hiccup replied, as he copied the vet's movements with his own harness. "The only exceptions are the Zipplebacks. They don't breathe actual fire. One head lets loose with gas, and the other head sparks it." He went on, explaining in detail about each dragon's characteristic flaming technique. Sam listened with half an ear, as he powered on the ship's systems and double-checked the navigation numbers.

"As for the Night Furies" Hiccup was saying, "they have to be seen to be believed! If they have a shot limit, we haven't found it, and the fire they spit is a bright blue-white ball which literally explodes when it hits something!"

Sam whistled at this. "Do you think you could convince Toothless or Skye to show me?"

Hiccup snorted. "Are you kidding? They enjoy shooting at things. I think they like to see how hard a target they can hit at a distance. When we get back, I'll see if I can get Toothless to take out a target for you. I owe him a flight, anyway."

"Deal" Sam said, as slipped on his helmet, closed the canopy, and lit up the main drive. "Sit back and enjoy the ride" he said, as the aircar lifted smoothly into the late afternoon sky, and headed northeast at a little over a hundred knots.

Hiccup was amazed by the smoothness of the flight. With the canopy closed, the only sounds were a muted whine from the turbines, the rush of air through the ventilation system, and an occasional audible signal from the instruments. He gazed out the canopy at the ocean passing far below. "How high are we?"

"About a kilomet... sorry, a little more than half a vika" Sam replied. "About halfway to Bergen, so I'd best call in. Excuse me a moment."

Call in? Hiccup wondered. What in Thor's Beard does he mean by that?!

He soon found out. Sam flipped a couple of small silvery levers, then pressed a blue spot on the odd-looking handle he was gripping. His next words were an utter mystery to Hiccup. He had a strange feeling this would have been the case even if the language had been Norse.

"Bergen Approach, Ranger Nineteen out of Alladale, request clearance to Kogen base for resupply."

He lifted his thumb, waited a few moments. Silence, except for the craft's background noise. Sam frowned, pressed down on the spot and spoke again. "Bergen Approach, Ranger Nineteen, do you copy?"

Still nothing. "Computer" Sam said. "Communications and GNSS

status?"

"\_Primary and secondary commsat: No signal. Primary and secondary GNSS: No signal. All other communication systems nominal" \_came the prompt reply.

Sam's frown deepened. \_If this is an IB\_ he thought, \_it's damned persistent!\_ He switched frequencies and tried again. "Kogen base, Ranger Nineteen out of Alladale, do you copy?"

He tried twice more, even going as far as calling on the UNEC distress frequency. Nothing but silence.

"Sam?" said an uncertain voice. "Is something wrong?"

He blinked. He'd nearly forgotten his passenger. "Not with our flight" he said. "But I still can't contact anyone on the radio, and primary navigation is still out. Damned strange, it is..."

Feeling like he was going to regret the answer, Hiccup continued. "What's a ra... ray-d-oh?"

The vet looked at him with an expression Hiccup couldn't read. "You don't know? Even as isolated as Berk is, I would have thoughtâ€"

"Look" Hiccup interrupted, growing increasingly nervous and more than a bit angry. "We may be isolated, but it doesn't mean we're backwards! Just tell me what's going on, and forget about being condescending, please? Just for once?"

Sam's mouth dropped open, and his eyes widened. After a moment, he came back to his senses and shook his head. "I'm sorry" he said. "We come from different cultures, and I've forgotten that too many times today."

"Apology accepted" the teen shot back. "Now what's going on?!"

Sam took a deep breath, and throttled back their speed to a leisurely fifty knots. "Radio has many uses" he said. "I use it to communicate with other people over long distances. Under the right conditions, and with the right equipment, you can hear and be heard halfway around the world. Any time I get within a certain distance of my organization's bases, I'm supposed to call ahead to let them know I'm coming."

"Better" Hiccup replied, nodding. "So, if I understand correctly, no one's answering your call? And they should be?"

"Exactly" Sam said, slapping the communications area of his console. "Same problem I had this morning, before you and Fishlegs found me. We're not more than six \_vikas\_ out from the base. They should be able to hear me as if I were in the same room!" He frowned again, and took the ship lower. "In fact" he continued, worriedly, "we should be able to see Bergen by now..."

As they drew closer to the rugged-looking mainland, Sam grew steadily more confused. The outline of the coast looked right, but there was something missing. A lot of somethings.

He dropped down to two hundred meters, the lowest cruising altitude allowed by law over a populated area, throttled back to thirty-five knots, and flew a pass over what should have been downtown Bergen and its surroundings.

It was what he couldn't see which bothered him, far more than what he could. There were the seaports, yes, but where in blazes was the Stavanger ferry? And where the huge University of Bergen campus should have been, there was nothing but an open field!

And what about other air traffic? Bergen was a busy place. There was no way he should have been able to just fly in over the city without seeing at least a cargo craft or three, let alone all the personal aircars. Yet, his radar scope was as blank as a clean sheet of paper.

Sam felt the beginnings of panic, and fought it down with an effort. He gained some altitude and swung his craft due north, straight for Haukasskogen. His state of mind was not helped by the fact the entire length of the Asaneveien highway, which most UNEC pilots used as a visual aid for approaching the base, seemed to have utterly disappeared. A few minutes later, the computer beeped a warning, and said \_"Destination reached. Commence landing procedure."\_

An icicle substituted itself for Sam's spine. His hand trembled as he reached for the throttles. The craft descended smoothly and settled onto a flat meadow. Sam cut power, then opened the canopy and climbed down, completely ignoring Hiccup's questions about why they'd set down in the middle of nowhere.

No base. No buildings. Nothing but bird and animal noises. The late afternoon sun turned the grassland a bright orange, and a gentle breeze rustled the tall stalks. The spring air was chill and crisp, with scents of wildflowers, pine, spruce and fir all competing for space.

Distinctly absent was the scent of any man-made pollution.

Sam dropped to his knees, clutching tightly at the grass. SciFi stories had been a staple of his reading in earlier years, including such notables as Poul Anderson and Andre Norton. His overloaded mind was now taking those stories, adding a bunch of anomalies, and putting them together in a pattern he didn't like at all.

An apparently isolated community, unnoticed by a world which had at least partly explored nearly every square meter of its surface.

Dragons, a species thought to be long extinct if not a myth.

Three hundred years of war with dragons, just recently stopped.

People who had never heard of UNEC, or modern medicine.

A village without electricity, running water, or anything other than crude sanitary facilities. Not even a single satellite phone.

No GNSS. No commsats. No radio contact.



He looked up at the darkening sky. \_Because there \_are\_ no satellites\_ the thought said. \_No commsats. No radios, other than what you have in your ship right now. You can't receive if there's nothing out there to send, and vice versa!\_

Time travel.

It was the last piece in the crazy jigsaw puzzle his mind had been working on, subconsciously, since he'd woken up on Berk that morning. Somehow, whatever effect he'd encountered had thrown him into the past, far enough to where Vikings were very much alive and well, Alladale was just an abstract marking on a map, and everyone and everything he knew wouldn't exist for at least a thousand years.

A familiar creaking sounded behind him. "Sam?" Hiccup said, limping up to his side. "What's wrong? You've been just kneeling there for nearly five minutes. Where's your base? Are you sure you brought us to the right spot?"

He smiled gently up at the teen. "Oh. Hello, Hiccup" he said, as casually as if he were greeting him at a coffee shop. "I think we have a problem."

Blackness rushed in to claim him as he fainted.

## 5. Chapter 5

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

### Chapter 5

"\_Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment." (Buddha)\_

Sam flinched as a stream of water splashed against his face. \_When did it start raining?\_ he wondered, bemused.

Full consciousness â€" and full memory of what had just happened â€" returned in a rush. He sat bolt upright, gasping for breath, and looked around. Nothing had changed. Same grassy field where the smooth synthcrete of Kogen Base should have been, same clear darkening sky, same young Viking standing a couple of feet away, looking very worried, one of the vet's spare water bottles in one hand. "Are you all right?" he asked. "Why are we here? What did you expect to find?"

Sam took a shaky breath, closed his eyes for a moment, then got unsteadily to his feet. Hiccup was beside him in an instant, offering support. "Thanks, lad" he said. He found his balance returning quicker than expected. "To answer â€" I'll be fine, and we're here because this is where the base is supposed to be..." He trailed off, still grappling with the truth.

"So you made a mistake" Hiccup said, with a shrug. "Happens to all of us. Can we go now?"

Sam bit his lip. "That's the problem" he said, slowly, trying to decide how to phrase the rest of his reply. "Mainly because I just realized where â€" or, more to the point, \_when\_ â€" I am." He

gestured around the field, then met the teen's gaze. "Hiccup" he said, carefully, "this may be a bit hard to swallow. The reason there's no base here, now, is because it hasn't been built yet. It won't be, for at least a thousand years."

He turned to the west, and waved his arm. "There's supposed to be a highw â€" uhh, a big road â€" two big roads, actually, one for traffic in each direction, just west of us. And the area we flew over, near the harbor? There's going to be a huge univers... uhh, 'school' ...built there, with students from all over the world!"

By now, Hiccup was beginning to wonder if his visitor had a decent hold on reality. Sam met his gaze again, and asked "What's the date?"

"May First" he said, with a shrug. "Why does it matter?"

Sam shook his head. "No, the \_year.\_"

"Eight-forty" Hiccup replied, growing more upset by the moment. "Again, why does it matter?"

Sam winced. His eyes were sunken, his face pale. "Hiccup" he said, his voice flat and calm, "I was born in the year two-thousand-fifty. April First, to be exact. When I started work this morning, the year was two-thousand-ninety. Next thing I know, I've ended up far away from where I started, both in distance and time. I don't have the slightest clue how I got here, or why it happened..." He trailed off.

The teen glared at him. "This is a really bad time for jokes, Sam!" he snapped. "In case you've forgotten, there are still sick dragons back at Berk!"

"You think I don't know that?!" Sam shot back, with some heat of his own. He waved both arms at their surroundings. "You think I \_planned\_ on coming here?! Since you found me this morning, I thought I'd just been thrown off course, and landed in some hermit commune! Aye, there was truth in that, but I had no idea I'd been thrown twelve-hundred-plus years into the past as well!"

"\_Hermit commune?!\_" Hiccup gasped, outraged. "You stuck-up troll! Berk is known all over this part of the world! Leather, metalwork, weapons, jewelry... and that doesn't even \_touch\_ what we've done with the dragons!"

He tapped his prosthetic leg. "What sacrifices have you made lately for those you care about, Sam? I nearly got killed saving that 'hermit commune' from a monster of a dragon four times the size of your ship and three times uglier! Toothless and I barely got out of it alive! There were others who weren't so lucky!"

"But guess what? If we hadn't done it, dragons and humans alike would still be dying by the hundreds, if not thousands, each year, and I'd have been exiled by my own father! We stopped a senseless war which had been going for \_three hundred years,\_ and eliminated a threat which may, in time, have spread all over the world. Who knows how many lives we saved?! If losing part of my leg is what it cost to protect all those people, human and dragon, then I think it was a pretty good deal!"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "You may have different machines and tools than we do. Some are, I admit, better ways of doing some things. But guess what? Machines and tools are only as good as whoever's using them! If you really are from the future, and you're an example of the kind of \_person\_ living there, I think I'm better off right here!"

Sam flushed, glaring at the youth. He opened his mouth to deliver a suitably stinging comeback, but nothing emerged. Hiccup simply held his gaze in an unwavering stare, daring him to even \_think\_ of arguing further.

Something snapped in Sam's guts, and the tension fled as quickly as it had come. His legs went shaky again, and he barely managed to stay upright. \_He's right\_ that annoyingly strong inner voice told him. \_You may be a great animal doctor, but you're giving a lousy account of yourself as a human.\_

He pressed his hands tight against his face, and took another shaky breath. \_Focus!\_ He told himself. \_Immediate problems: Sick dragons, rare species, no more CME-2, twelve HUNDRED-plus years, might have to rely on supportive treatment alone, do I have enough Theolair, why the frell didn't the \_humans\_ get sick, do I just bail and look for a way home, sweet Saint Eligius, where would I even \_start,\_ should I even be doing \_any\_ thing, I mean, what might happen to my own time because of things I do now, oh, Essence, this whole situation is completely INSANE...\_!

His thoughts kept whirling about each other, winding up like a clock's mainspring. Suddenly, in the midst of the mental chaos, one simple sentence broke through, spinning the tension away in its wake. It echoed in his mind, sounding nearly the same as when he'd repeated it during graduation.

"\_I accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of my professional knowledge and competence..."\_

\_And where in that sentence\_ his inner voice continued, \_does it say anything about what form such improvement will take? Or in what time?\_

His head came up as a calm sense of purpose dropped over him like a blanket, and he felt his shoulders relax in the same instant. \_I've already changed history\_ he thought. \_No matter what I've set in motion, it cannot be undone.\_

He looked over at Hiccup. \_If I stop now, it could mean the end of Skye, her young and other dragons. It would certainly mean breaking my oath of office. Neither one is an option!\_

"Come on, lad" he said, abruptly, turning back towards his ship. Hiccup followed, eagerly, though Sam swore he heard him mutter "...about time!..." As they settled into the craft's cabin and buckled themselves in, Sam looked over at his passenger, his expression embarrassed. "Ahh... Hiccup, about what I said earlier... I'm... sorry..."

The teen's green eyes held his for a long moment. "I have a bad habit" Sam continued, "of being... well, thinking about others

outside my culture as... I mean..."

He trailed off, helplessly. Hiccup grinned. "In my culture" he said, gently, "we judge someone by their actions, not their words. I'm sorry I called you a troll." His expression shifted to deadly serious in a heartbeat, along with hope and uncertainty. "Your actions so far, Sam Shay, have spoken more clearly than anything you've said this afternoon. Keep it up."

"I hope I can" Sam muttered, as he brought the ship's systems on-line and lifted smoothly into the evening sky.

They flew in silence for several minutes, then Hiccup spoke up. "Sam, what are you going to do about medicine? You said you needed more to treat the other dragons."

"That's what I'm hoping your village healer can help with, lad" he replied. "Since everyone ate from the same catch, but no one among your people got sick, I'm hoping there may be a treatment hiding in whatever your cooks add to a meal. It could be anything, but most likely some herb or spice which has a natural antitoxin in it. If I can isolate it, I can find a way to make what I need. Until then, I've got different drugs which can at least give the other dragons a fighting chance."

Hiccup thought about this, then continued. "How do you plan to get back? To your home? I mean, to your time?"

Sam let out a long sigh, and his hands tightened on the controls. "Decided to believe me, have you?"

The teen shrugged. "I didn't at first, but based on what I've seen so far it's the only explanation which makes sense. Can you even \_get\_ back?"

"I've been wondering about that ever since I realized what's happened" Sam replied, then added: "At least, when I wasn't fainting in panic! Honestly, I have no idea. The science I grew up with has always held time travel as impossible." He snorted. "I think I can safely disregard that idea!"

"Don't blame yourself" Hiccup said. "I'd probably have reacted the same way if I were thrown into your future." He fiddled idly with the harness straps, then asked "What if you can't?"

Sam didn't answer for another few minutes. "I'd prefer not to think aboutâ€" he started to say, but Hiccup interrupted him. "You have to" he said, firmly. "Sometimes, a battle is won not because of how well or how poorly you fight, but because of how far ahead you plan."

Sam blinked, and turned to stare at the youth in surprise. "From what little I know of Viking culture, planning ahead was less important than brute force at any given moment."

Hiccup shrugged, and gazed thoughtfully out at the sky. "I'm not what you would call your typical Viking" he said, softly, his tone an odd mixture of pride and pain. "Just ask anyone in the village." He sighed, and continued "You haven't answered my question."

"If I can't get back" Sam said, as he slowed down and dropped lower, preparing to land. "You might have a new permanent resident." His tone was bleak.

"Would it really be so bad?" Hiccup said, his tone turning hopeful. "Skye likes you, Sam. A lot! I told my dad you'd done more with her in five minutes than I'd managed in five weeks, and I wasn't joking. As for Berk, yeah, it has its problems, but can you truly say they're worse than what you'd face in your time?"

The vet said nothing as he flipped on his landing lights. The brilliant blue-white glare startled some villagers who'd been standing near his approach path. As Sam settled his ship to the ground, he identified one of the figures as Stoick.

The other man was slightly shorter, though just as stocky, with a long blond braid and bushy mustache. He sported a prosthetic left 'peg-leg,' and a large tankard where his right hand should have been. "That's Gobber, our blacksmith" Hiccup said, as Sam shut the ship down and opened the canopy. "I've been his apprentice almost since I could walk." His brow furrowed in concern. "What's Elder Gothi doing here?"

Sam's attention was immediately drawn to a third figure, one he hadn't noticed before in the shadows. As his eyes adapted to the twilight, relieved only by the aircar's boarding lights and a nearly-full moon, he began to see details. Not much taller than Hiccup, female, with a head of straight silvery hair braided in a neat ponytail, clad in dark-brown leather. Her left eye seemed to be in a permanent squint, almost completely closed, and she carried a crooked staff nearly twice her height.

She eyed the new arrivals calmly, and started making her way towards the ship. Despite her slow movements, she radiated a level of wisdom and authority which overshadowed even Stoick's air of command. She stopped alongside the craft's rounded nose and looked up, expectantly.

"Come on!" Hiccup said, urgently, as he unbuckled himself and motioned Sam to get a move on. "You don't keep her waiting!"

Startled into movement, Sam quickly complied. Moments later, they were standing before the Elder. Hiccup nodded a greeting. "Good evening, Elder" he said, respectfully.

"And to you, young Hiccup" she replied, her tone surprisingly rich for her size. Her one-eyed gaze turned to Sam. He found himself torn between a desire to salute and checking his conscience for recent mischief. He gulped, and finally settled for copying Hiccup's greeting.

"Welcome, Healer Shay" Gothi replied, warmly. She extended a thin hand which Sam, after a moment's hesitation, accepted. He needn't have worried; her grip would have frightened a champion arm-wrestler. "I have heard of, and seen, what your skills have done for our people" she continued. "I speak for the village when I say we are all grateful, but I understand there is still more to be done. How can we help?"

Sam took a breath to reply, but was interrupted by his stomach projecting a very audible complaint about a day's diet of nothing but concentrate bars and water. Hiccup's innards followed with their own audible eruption a moment later. The impromptu symphony brought chuckles from Stoick and Gobber, and a knowing smile from the Elder. "We can continue this over dinner" she said, gesturing towards the house.

Minutes later, Sam was gratefully tearing into the biggest roasted turkey leg he'd ever seen, a well-seasoned mashed tuber he thought might be a turnip, and a dark bread which, though coarse, was much sweeter and more filling than he'd expected. Mead was the drink of choice, though it was watered down from what he'd tried earlier.

Despite the meal and good company, he couldn't shake the feeling something was missing. Suddenly, he realized both Night Furies were gone. Stoick was quick to provide an answer. "Went out half an hour before ye returned" he rumbled. "Haven't seen 'em since."

Sam nodded, relieved, but more than a little surprised at the speed of Skye's recovery. He didn't really have time to ponder it because he suddenly found himself the subject of conversation. In response to Gothi's questions, he explained as best he could, given the gaps in culture and technology, about what he'd found and what he'd done to treat the poisoning.

"The questions bothering me the most" he said, fighting down an urge to say 'how do I jump forward in time about 1200 years,' "are why none of the villagers got sick, and where this toxin came from. It's usually limited to much warmer waters, and very rarely shows up in this part of the world. Unless I know where it came from, I can't guarantee you won't have the same problem later on."

"I may have part of the answer for you" Gothi said, leaning back in her chair and cradling a mug of mint-scented tea. "Sealegs the Strong, father of Fishlegs, was the one who brought in yesterday's catch. I have spoken to him, and he told me all three of the fishing boats were blown off their normal course by a sudden gale. By the time they got their boats under control, they were nearly to Dragon Island.

"Normally, they would never have cast nets so close to the island, so as not to provoke the dragons who have chosen to remain wild and still live there. But the day was growing old, and it was either fish where they were or come back with empty barrels. So, despite the rumbles from the mountain itself, and the strange dark color of the water, Sealegs ordered the nets into place. He and his crew brought back a fine haul, and you know the rest." She took a long gulp of her tea. "Does this give you any clues, Healer?"

Sam nodded slowly. "It does, Elder. Can Sealegs show me on a map or chart where this place is? I'll need to go there tomorrow, after I check on the dragons."

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Hiccup fidgeting. Before Gothi could answer, he spoke up. "Elder Gothi, with due respect" he began, flinching slightly under a brief glare from Stoick but not backing down. "Sa... Healer Shay isn't familiar with these waters, or their islands. It could be dangerous for him to go alone. I can go

with him."

The Elder's eyebrows twitched upward. "With the wonders at his command, young Hiccup? I would imagine he has everything he needs to protect himself, and you have responsibilities to your village and your people."

"You're right, Elder" he replied, with a slight grin. "And the dragons are now part of our village and our lives. That makes them my responsibility as well, doesn't it? How would I be honoring that responsibility if I let the only person we've met who's capable of healing them of this sickness get lost, or hurt? He may command 'wonders,' as you say, but he has no way to... well, call on his own people if he needs help."

The adults all looked startled at this. Sam had been wondering how â€œ or even if â€œ he should broach the subject of just how far displaced he was from his 'own people.' Now, he had a sinking feeling his young guide was making the decision for him.

"I don't understand" Gobber said, scratching his chin and eyeing Sam thoughtfully. "Ye made th' trip to th' mainland an' back almost in less time than it takes ta' load a longboat, let alone do the sailin'. Do ye not have a messenger hawk? Just how far are ye from home, Healer?"

A sudden chill went down Sam's spine. He looked first at Hiccup, then the Elder. Both nodded at him slightly. "It's not a matter of distance, Gobber" he said, slowly. "It's more a matter of time..."

He told them the whole story. Stoick looked disbelieving at first, then outright scornful. Sam thought the result was what a thundercloud might look like if it had red hair and a beard. Gobber's expression varied between disbelief and utter fascination.

Neither Hiccup nor Gothi gave any sign other than listening intently. "I wouldn't blame you if you think I've gone bonkers" Sam said, swallowing the last of his mead. "I can scarcely believe it myself. Now you know why I need your village healer's help where I didn't think I would before."

Silence held the room for a few minutes, broken only by the faint chirps and rumbles of other dragons settling in for the night. Finally, Gothi nodded and got up. "In view of what I've learned" she said, in that same soft-but-commanding voice the Vikings knew so well, "Stoick, I think it would be an excellent idea for Hiccup to go with our visiting Healer." She held up a hand, sharply, as the chief started to protest. "Walk me back to my house" she said. "I will explain on the way."

Stoick looked about ready to erupt like a furry volcano. He got himself back under control with a visible effort, stood up, and collected his helmet. "Go with the Healer tomorrow, son" he grumbled at Hiccup. "Be back before sundown!"

They left quickly, Stoick holding the door until Gothi had gone ahead of him. "Dinna' tell me ye actually \_believe...\_" was all the others heard as the door shut behind them.

Gobber sighed, stretched, and suddenly cut loose with a belch which all but shook the table. "Not bad" Hiccup said, as he started clearing the dishes away. "About eight out of ten."

Sam's eyes widened in shock as the blacksmith gave them both a gap-toothed grin. "I dinna' become Gobber the Belch fer nothin'" he said. "Only eight, though..." He drummed the table with his remaining set of fingers. "Have to work on it. Used to be a meal like that'd give me enough to send the plates right off the table."

He waved his hand at the door. "Ye certainly gave him a lot to swallow, Healer" he said, the grin still holding. "I wouldna' worry too much. Stoick's always been a hard nut to crack."

Sam eyed the stocky blacksmith curiously. "Please, call me Sam. You don't seem to have a problem with my story."

Gobber shrugged. "Why should I? Whether ye really are from the future, or just a wanderin' madman with fancy machines and a gift for healing, it doesna' matter to me. Yer actions today spoke far louder than anythin' comin' out o' yer gullet, an' the Gods move in mysterious ways. Ye showed up, ye were willing an' able to help our scaly friends when none of us could, an' ye hit it right off with the most stand-offish dragon Berk's ever seen." He nodded, thoughtfully. "Not bad for a first day."

"Thanks" Sam replied, eyeing Gobber's prosthetics. "If you don't mind my asking, how did you...?"

"Not at all" the blacksmith said, with a chuckle. He explained about his hard-won arguments with the two dragon species responsible, a Nadder and a Gronckle. "Sure, there be days when I miss havin' a couple of normal limbs" he said, refilling his tankard attachment. "But do I blame the beasties? Naah." He took a swig, and continued "How can anyone blame any creature just for defendin' itself?"

Sam was rocked to his core. Such a simple, true statement, but one he rarely heard. "I wish more people in my time felt that way" he said, quietly. "Even with all the progress we've made, there are plenty left who would think nothing of trying their best to wipe out \_any\_ critter who had the temerity to fight back." He smiled, bitterly. "That's a big part of what keeps myself and my fellow Rangers busy. You should hear what happened with the killer whales a fewâ€" "

He stopped, cold, realizing he'd been about to say 'a few years ago,' just as though he were in his own time. \_Must be the mead\_ he mused. He was saved from having to elaborate by Gobber's puzzled expression. "Killer... whales? Sam, what are ye jabberin' about?"

"You may know them by another name" he said, and proceeded to give a detailed description of the huge, intelligent, black-and-white oceanic mammals. Hiccup, who had finished the dishes and quietly returned to the table, with a mug of tea, nodded in recognition. "He's talking about sea wolves, Gobber."

"Oh, aye!" The smith said, brightening. "Now I get ye. What happened, then?"

"It was nasty" Sam replied, fiddling with his mug. "In my time, nearly all types of hunting have been outlawed..."



Hiccup gasped. Gobber's eyebrows climbed straight into his hairline. "Why would you do that? What do you do for food?" Hiccup asked. "Aye, and furs?" Gobber added.

"That's an even longer story" Sam said. "The short version is, in my time, the world's ecosystems... uhh, 'animal populations,' rather, have become depleted to the point where those populations are barely surviving. A big part of my job is helping them to thrive and grow strong again. In order to help, hunting for anything other than bare survival needs has been outlawed all over the world.

"As for clothing â€" 'furs,' as you put it, Gobber â€" hardly any of it is still made from animals. Leather is still around, but limited in use, and it all comes from animals which are farmed exclusively to be food and leather sources. What I'm wearing now is made of plant fibers, a mix of cotton and a material called 'Xenylon' made from kelp â€" seaweed."

Curious, Gobber reached out to finger the edge of Sam's sleeve. "Seems strong enough" he muttered. "But hardly enough to keep ye warm in winter."

"That's why we have jackets. Anyway, about fifteen years ago, from my time, a group of First Nation teenagers got drunk and took it into their heads how they were each going to prove their manhood to the other â€" by hunting down some killer whales, or sea wolves if you prefer.

"Off they went, in nothing but small boats, armed only with hand harpoons. They found one of the resident pods â€" group of whales â€" easily enough, but they made the mistake of choosing an adolescent as their first target. The young whale got a harpoon in his left eye, just for being curious.

"The young one's mother was nearby. Before the local patrols had gotten so much as a hint of what was happening, she took matters into her own hands â€" or, in this case, jaws." He shook his head. "Next morning, patrols found pieces of the boat and pieces of the four teens, scattered all over the beach.

"The worst part is no one knew, at first, what the four had tried to do. It was assumed the whales had attacked just for the fun of it, the way a cat will sometimes play with its prey, and there was enormous public pressure to kill every member of the whale pod believed responsible, laws be damned.

"A couple of weeks later, just as the outcry was reaching its peak, one of my fellow Rangers found the harpoon. The markings on it matched the tribe the teens belonged to. Soon afterward, the young whale's injury was discovered, and it became clear what had happened and why.

"Even with the whole story revealed, some were still calling for wiping out the whales." He sighed, and stared at his now-empty mug. "We nearly lost fifty years of progress in two weeks" he said, softly. "And my organization was caught right in the middle of it. It got bad enough, at one point, there was talk of restricting our jurisdiction to land animals. UNEC had already gotten its share of black eyes over closing down Sea World and other such circuses, so

the entire incident was just more fuel to the fire."

Both Gobber and Hiccup were slack-jawed in amazement. "Let me see if I've got this straight" Hiccup said. "A bunch of drunken kids go out and try to kill something much larger and more powerful than they are, for no good reason. Then they get killed by the same creatures, who are acting in obvious self-defense, and the people in your time \_get mad at the sea wolves?!"\_

The vet nodded. "That about sums it up, lad. I'm happy to say the young whale survived."

"But how can he learn to hunt and survive if he's missing an eye?" Hiccup said. "Worse, how could he defend himself against other predators?"

Sam looked puzzled. "Seeing's not an issue. Whales can do it with their ears. They can send out streams of clicks and whistles underwater, and the echos they get back give them a far more detailed view of their world than they'd ever get with their eyes. But what other predators are you on about, lad? In my time, at least, those whales are the top predators in the oceans."

"Scauldrons" Hiccup answered, promptly. "And Thunderdrums. Both are sea-dwelling dragons, just as big, if not bigger, than any sea-wolf. They're not around in your time?"

Sam could only shake his head as he digested this. Gobber sighed again. "Madness" he muttered. "A mother fightin' for her young, an' she gets blamed for winnin' the fight." His gaze held the vet's. "I don't think I like the sound of your world, Sam, no matter what time or place it's in. Are ye certain ye want ta' go back, even if ye can find a way? Speakin' for meself, I think ye'd do well ta' stay right here. Odin knows we could use someone with yer talents."

Sam started to reply, then stopped at the unexpected surge of uncertainty rising from his guts. Finally, as if from a distance, he heard his own voice answering. "I have to, Gobber. I have to at least try. I took an oath to fight such madness, and it's not an oath I take lightly."

The burly blacksmith got up and stretched, an enormous yawn parting his jaws. "Madness like that can strike anywhere, at any time" he rumbled. "I understand takin' an oath ta' fight it, but does it truly matter where ye are when ye live up to it? Nay, don't answer now" he continued, as Sam took a breath to reply. "Jus' food fer' thought. Hiccup, come find me at the shop once you and Sam get back. G'night."

He lumbered out, his peg-leg clacking on the wood floor. Stoick came back in at the same moment, the two men exchanging backslaps as they passed. He stopped to hang his helmet on its usual hook, then eyed his son and their visitor for a long moment, his expression unreadable.

Finally, he nodded, said "Good night to you both. Hiccup, don't stay up too late," and went upstairs without another word.

Sam and Hiccup exchanged a look. "That's new" the teen muttered, watching his father's retreating figure in surprise. "Whatever the

Elder said to him must have been fairly powerful."

"I'll take your word for it" Sam replied, equally curious. "And, by the way, thanks for the meal. Right now, though, we have a more pressing issue." He stood up and headed for the door. "We need to make a last check of the other dragons before turning in."

It was Hiccup's turn to look puzzled, as he got up and followed. "You're welcome, but... Turning in? To what?"

The vet laughed. "Figure of speech, lad" he said, as they went to get his equipment. "I'll explain on the way."

They started with the dragons Sam hadn't gotten to before running out of CME-2, two of which, a Gronckle and another Nadder, were having serious trouble breathing. Fortunately, the pair responded well to Theolaire and were soon able to drift off to sleep, though they remained feverish. Hookfang was awake and in good spirits, though still shaky. Sparks, Spitelout's Terror, seemed completely recovered. They found her perched in the rafters above the house's kitchen space, watching the preparations for a late dinner with a fixed gaze any eagle would have envied.

As for Stormfly, they found her and Astrid on top of a nearby cliff, stargazing. The Nadder surprised everyone by greeting Sam with a much gentler nudge than earlier, and a wing draped partly over his shoulders. "You've got competition" Astrid said to Hiccup, with a grin.

"Hey, if he can get along with dragons like I can, it makes my job that much easier" he replied, sitting down next to her. They leaned against each other, causing Sam to wonder if he might be needed elsewhere. "Did you get the rest of the dragons taken care of?" Astrid asked, suddenly.

Hiccup squirmed a bit. "Yes and no..." he started to say.

This earned him a sharp glance. "Which is it?" she said. Sam felt what little peace the scene was creating start to ebb away, and took it as a cue to gently disengage himself from under the Nadder's wing and gather up his equipment. "I'm going to go put this stuff away" he said. "Hiccup, can I borrow a section of your floor to sleep on?"

"Sure, Sam" he said, grateful for the distraction but knowing Astrid wouldn't let him get away with it for long. "And is it all right if I tell her..." he trailed off.

"Everything" Sam said, as he turned back towards the chief's house. "Good night, lad."

He walked away as quickly as he could, burdened with backpack and equipment bag. As he went, he caught snippets of their conversation, including Astrid's voice suddenly escalating in strident tones: "...the \_future?!\_ Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, if you didn't have a reputation for..."

Sam winced, feeling somewhat guilty at leaving his young friend to face the music. The guilt was soon swept away by a wave of fatigue so strong he stumbled slightly. \_All catching up with me\_ he thought, as

he dropped his equipment off at the house, then went back to his ship for his bedroll and camping kit.

Like all Rangers, he carried enough in the way of supplies and equipment to live in the wild for over a week if need be. \_Glad I don't have to use the tent\_ he thought, as he got what he needed and climbed up the boarding ladder to secure the canopy. What he saw, as he came to the top and shined his flashlight in, made him roll his eyes.

"You again!" he muttered, eyeing the small green form sprawled happily across the passenger seat, snoring softly. The little female Terror twitched awake at the sound of his voice, blinked at him sleepily "â€" then started to shy away, clearly expecting eviction.

Sam started to encourage her, then stopped. The craft's interior was utterly undisturbed, save for the faint impressions of claw marks in the seat's padding. All of the dragons he'd encountered so far were certainly cleanly, their scent an unusual but not unpleasant variant of that found on snakes. Most importantly, none of the craft's systems could be activated, accidentally or otherwise, without his thumbprint or a retinal scan.

He chirred softly at the dragon. Her pupils widened in surprise, and the pre-flight tension left her small body. Sam extended a hand and, once again, she bumped against it as she settled back down. "Get a good night's rest, little one" he said, closing the canopy about halfway and climbing down.

Less than ten minutes later, he had his field mattress and sleeping bag set up near the fireplace, along with a battery-powered lantern. Though Berk was definitely in what its residents would call a heat wave, unusual for early spring, Sam's wrist computer placed the nighttime temperature at around eight Celsius. He took a moment to lay out fresh clothing for the next day, and strip down to skivvies and T-shirt, before climbing gratefully into his sleeping bag and shutting off the lantern.

Sleep did not come easily, despite his exhaustion. His mind insisted on replaying parts of the day's events, particularly those when he was so absorbed in his work he seemed to forget where and \_when\_ he was. What bothered him even more was how well he seemed to fit in, a few culture clashes notwithstanding.

\_I can't even afford to \_think\_ such things!\_ He mused. \_My first duty, after clearing up what's left of the brevetoxin, is to get home and back to my job. Whatever brought me here, it stands to reason it works both ways. I just need to figure it out...\_

He worked hard to recall everything he'd seen, heard, and felt before getting knocked out. \_One of those pirates tried to shoot me with a plasma charge. I dodged the bolt, but it hit...\_

Something. He breathed deeply, willing the memory alive. There had been an explosion, a huge cloud of dust, rock debris pinging off his hull like out-of-control hail, then something dark-gray-silvery under the rock...

He wasn't even aware he'd drifted off, though a glance at his wrist

unit showed over an hour had passed. It was the voices which had woken him, along with the front door being pushed open. The soft shuffling of draconic footsteps sounded, and Sam turned his head to see both Night Furies settling down barely a meter away from him.

Hiccup's voice whispered "...night, Astrid" near the door, then it closed again. Quiet footsteps sounded, along with a rhythmic squeak from his prosthetic leg, as he made his way up to his own room.

Sam turned back over. His mind stubbornly shifted back into high gear, trying to pick up where it had left off. Suddenly, something soft and dark settled over his torso. He looked up, startled, and found himself staring into a pair of opaline eyes. Skye huffed, softly, and settled her head on her forelimbs, her left wing still partly extended over him.

"Whoa" he muttered, his gaze moving between hers and the ebony expanse of her wing. All this time, Skye continued to watch him, her gaze dancing with gentle humor. Sam reached up to touch his unexpected cover, and found it to be smooth as polished silk. Skye shivered slightly at the contact, her gaze managing to convey questions no words ever could.

He slipped into sleep again, unsure if he could ever answer with any certainty.

## 6. Chapter 6

\_Just wanted to say THANK YOU to all my readers to date, particularly those who have 'Favorited' and reviewed! I did want to mention one thing, in case some of you who have read the works of my fellow writer, 'Norwesterner,' notice some familiar references. You're not mistaken - He has, very graciously, granted permission for me to 'dovetail' parts of 'The Dragonwing Effect' with his 'Taming a Heart' trilogy. \_

\_I'm not big into spoilers, so that's all I'm going to say. Enjoy as we sail on into Chapter six!  
><em>

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 6\*\***

"\_There is no illusion greater than fear" (Lao Tzu)\_

Thin wisps of cloud whipped past the aircar's canopy, almost too fast to see. Sam checked his instruments a final time before engaging the autopilot. The muffled humming of the TQ drive rose slightly in pitch, as did the whistle of the turbines, before the craft settled 'in the groove.' A countdown display flickered on above Sam's right eye, backed up by the computer's voice: "\_One minute, ten seconds, to interface."\_

He could just make out the rugged coastline of the Shetlands, growing closer by the second. \_Speed\_ he mused, still surprised by the simplicity of the answer. \_Speed and timing. Who knew?\_

Relays closed, and the weapons display for his EMP cannon flashed a reassuring green. \_"Forty seconds to interface" \_the computer said. Sam closed his eyes a moment and took a shaky breath. \_Everything I needed to do, I've done\_ he thought. \_Brevetoxin, cleared up. Flight recorder and holovid records, pulled and sealed in shielding containers. I'm really going to miss Skye and the others, but Saint Eligius Above, UNEC Command is going to have kittens when they see the recordings! \_

Something tugged at the back of his mind, a tugging which became a buzzing, like a hyperactive housefly. The buzzing sharpened, and became a voice whispering urgently about something. Sam shook his head sharply and the whispering receded as the computer spoke again. \_"Ten seconds, EMP fired."\_

He watched the bright blue-white sphere of roiling energy streak away. It struck the now-visible Arch squarely on one leg. A multicolored vortex appeared in the center, whirling with dizzying speed. \_"Six seconds" \_the computer announced. \_"Five... Four...  
\_\*\*COLLISION WARNING!\*\*"

His field of view went abruptly black. Panic surged through him as he instinctively disengaged the autopilot and pulled back hard on the joystick. Engine and structural alarms blaredâ€œ

As suddenly, he was floating free in open air. Far below, he watched his aircar flip end over end and crash into the Archway, turning both itself and his only way home into so much burning scrap metal, rock, and Essence only knew what else. \_Oh, frell...\_

Then he started falling. And he couldn't find his parachute. He tried to scream, but no sound broke the silence. Panic surged through him again, and he started thrashing madlyâ€œ

Suddenly, he landed on something broad, dark, and firm, turning the horribly fast descent into a smooth glide. The buzzing was back, only this time it resolved itself into four simple words.

"\_...not let you fall..."\_

He twitched violently as he came awake and sat up. Cold sweat blanketed his head and torso, causing him to shiver as the top half of his sleeping bag dropped away. His heart was racing like a triphammer, the blood roaring through his ears. His lungs weren't far behind; he had to force himself not to hyperventilate. His hands trembled as he brought them up to cradle his face and rub at his sleep-crustured eyes. Scattered memories flickered through his mind. Falling from a great height, landing on something, and something else, tremendously important, he knew he had to remember...

Too late. It was gone like mist in the wind. He sighed, looked around and realized it was near dawn. The portion of sky he could see through the kitchen window had gone from ebony to deep blue, the stars slowly fading away. The only sounds were soft snores from the two Night Furies, and a pair of considerably louder ones from upstairs.

Something firm and leathery suddenly nudged him in the back, nearly causing another panic attack. He whipped around to see Skye gazing at him, the dim light bringing a catlike reflection of emerald green

from her eyes. She tilted her head slightly, and the softest of queries rumbled from her throat.

Relieved, Sam reached out a hand to scratch gently under her jaw. This drew a more contented sound. "I'm all right" he whispered. "Just a nasty dream..."

Nature called. Sam winced, carefully extracted himself from his sleeping bag and Skye's wing (much to the dragon's obvious disgust), pulled on his pants and boots, and staggered for the door. The chilly air drew a gasp from him at the same time the sheer freshness of it brought him fully awake, scented with a mix of wood smoke, evergreen, and ocean. Waves rushed and rumbled against the shore, lending a background to the chirps of early-rising birds.

He made it to the outhouse with a minimum of questionable language and was deeply grateful he'd thought to bring along a bottle of sanitizing gel. On the way back, he couldn't help but stop and stare at his ship.

Sam had never been particularly superstitious, but neither did he ignore gut feelings, or what some called their 'inner voice.' Moving quickly, but quietly, he slipped back into the house, finished dressing, and came back out to give the aircar a thorough going-over from nose to turbine exhausts.

Although the craft's externals were in perfect order, the cockpit check yielded a surprise. His front passenger seat now sported a pair of Terrible Terrors; the green female who had befriended him yesterday, and another slightly larger one, colored turquoise blue with a pattern of darker blue scales down the spine. The two were curled up side-by-side, their tail-tips entwined. Sam didn't need his veterinary degree to guess the newcomer was male.

The edge of the sun poked up over the horizon, turning the ocean into a sheet of white-hot silver. As the light crept over the aircar's canopy, the green Terror twitched and blinked, eyes adjusting to the new day. She sat up and yawned hugely, giving Sam a sobering look at an array of dental cutlery Norman Bates would have envied. \_Note to self \_he thought. \_Do not annoy the small lady with the big fangs!\_

Fortunately, the lady in question was more concerned with stretching hard enough to make her spine pop. She blinked at Sam, chirped pleasantly, then eyed her still-snoring companion with somewhat less favor. Untangling her tail, she nudged him in the side with it. This produced a brief interruption in the blue's snoring, but nothing more. Another nudge, harder, with her head, got him to turn on his side " and continue snoring.

Despite the apparent physical impracticality, Sam swore he saw the female's eyes roll for a moment before she made her next attempt. She extended her neck, took the tip of her companion's tail very carefully into her mouth, and nipped. Hard.

The blue Terror's eyes flew open, and he cut loose with an aggrieved squawk which made Sam's ears ring. The blue whipped around to strike back at his assailant, spitting a small jet of fire which narrowly missed Sam's ear. The female was already in the air, chittering derisively.

Once again, Sam found himself turned into an impromptu launching platform as the blue one bounded across the center console, charged up the vet's front, and pushed off into flight from his shoulder. The pair zoomed into the morning air, swooping and diving at and around each other like demented hummingbirds, before straightening out and heading for the beach.

"Welcome to my world" a familiar voice said. Sam looked down to find Hiccup, fully dressed and shadowed by the two Night Furies, grinning up at him. "You're up awfully early" he continued. "Is everything all right?"

Sam nodded. "Right as rain. I... just felt like getting an early start." He suppressed a shiver. "Are they always like that?" he asked, nodding in the direction the Terrors had gone.

Hiccup shrugged. "Couldn't say for sure. The green one's been hanging around since last winter, but this is the first time she's shown any real interest in human company. As for the blue, I've never seen him before. Terrors are, by nature, kind of touchy, though. One minute, sound asleep. The next, looking for a handout or wrestling with each other. Did they do any damage?"

Sam looked around the cockpit again. His eyebrows went up as he spotted a scorch-mark on the back of his seat. Fortunately, the tough fabric was self-extinguishing. "Nothing a bit of new seat cover won't cure" he said. "Though I'm going to have the devil's own time explaining how that part of the seat got burned." He climbed down and brushed his hands together. "Where are you off to?" he asked, as he noticed Hiccup's flight harness and Toothless's saddle.

"Just a flight before things get busy" Hiccup replied. "I owe it to Toothless, since he's been cooped up so much, and this is the first real chance Skye's had to get back into the air since she got sick." He reached out and scratched along Toothless's neck, then hauled himself up onto the Night Fury's back. Sam admired the way the teen's prosthetic leg fitted neatly into its clip on the left pedal, and he said as much. Hiccup nodded. "Gobber's work" he said. "I was unconscious at the timeâ€\_Great Odin's Ghost!"\_

Hiccup's jaw dropped. At the same moment, Sam heard a familiar chuff. He turned to see Skye standing next to him, one front leg bent at the knee and wings folded back, watching him with invitation and expectant interest sparkling in her eyes. Confused, he looked to Hiccup for guidance. "All right, I'll bite" he said. "What's that position mean?"

It took Hiccup a moment to recover. "What does itâ€\_Sam, have you gone completely dense?! She's offering you a \_ride!"\_ He shook his head again. "First she makes Toothless introduce you, then she offers to take you flying with us... this is amazing!" He looked at the vet with new respect. "And I thought I was the one with the talent for getting along with dragons!"

Now it was Sam's turn to be stunned. Conflict tore through him as he went down on one knee, offering a hand to Skye. She stood back up and laid her muzzle against it, her gaze full of questions. "Lady Skye" Sam said, softly. "I'm flattered... Honored, in fact. But I... can't..."



He turned away. The buzzing in his head was back again, stronger this time, even going so far as starting a headache. Again, it sounded like someone was whispering urgently to him, barely on the threshold of hearing, but one word suddenly popped out of the noise with the force of a thunderclap: \_Look!\_

Startled, he met Skye's gaze again. The hurt in her eyes stood out like a solar flare, tearing at his heart in a way he'd never experienced before.

Toothless grunted something. Skye abruptly pulled away, took a running start, and launched herself into the air with a thunderous whoosh. The whispering vanished in the same instant. Hiccup looked like wanted to say more, but Toothless didn't give him the chance as he powered into the air, following closely in his mate's wake.

Sam stood up, watching them go, his innards a tight knot of shame and sadness. Gritting his teeth in frustration, he clenched his eyes shut and knocked his forehead repeatedly against the rear hull. \_I can bring an animal back from the brink of death. I can handle the idea of time travel and real dragons. But I can't shake a stupid childhood fear!\_

"You will only injure yourself that way" said a pleasant female tenor. "Why did you not go with them?"

The burst of anger fled, leaving only sadness in its wake. Sam took a deep breath and composed his expression before eyeing the new arrival. As tall and slender as the Elder had been short and stocky, she was clad in a combination of green-dyed and brown leather, complimented with a hooded forest-green cloak. Her vest held numerous pouches and pockets of various size. Flame-red hair cascaded in a wave over her shoulders, and gray-green eyes studied him closely out of a face which he could only term 'ageless.'

She extended her hand. "Ingrid Eriksson. I'm the village Healer. Elder Gothi said you needed to speak with me?"

He smiled as he shook her hand. "Sam Shay, Healer for... well, more than I care to think about, sometimes" he said. "Please, call me Sam."

She returned the smile, showing a set of amazingly white teeth. "If you will call me Ingrid." She nodded towards Mead Hall. "Come. We can talk over breakfast."

Talk they did. Extensively. Sam found his Viking counterpart far from what he had expected. Intelligent, observant, witty, and knowledgeable enough about medicinal herbs and plant extracts to make him feel like a rank amateur. He said as much as they topped off a hearty breakfast with mint tea. "Ingrid, I have to confess, I feel like I'm in school all over again. How do you remember it all? And you work with both animals and people?"

"What makes you think any of us ever leave 'school' behind?" she replied, with a chuckle. "I've been practicing since I was eight years old. My parents were both healers; my mother worked with animals, my father with people. Many of the treatments are similar, as you already know. What puzzles me is why you work only with

animals."

"The laws of my place and time don't permit me to work with people at all" Sam said. "There's a whole separate class of doct... uhh, 'Healers,' dedicated exclusively to people. It works both ways, though. Healers who work with people, in my time, are not usually permitted to work with animals."

She thought about this for a moment, then said "Strange. Is the art of preserving Life not the same, no matter what form it takes?"

Sam blinked. "You know, I never really thought about it that way. I think the main reason we're split is because there's so much to know. In my time, it takes seven years of schooling to become a vet, and nine to become a human doctor. And new discoveries are made all the time in both fields. Seems to me you'd have to be superhuman â€" uh, 'God-touched'â€" to work in both fields and still come out ahead."

She shrugged. "Perhaps. I would imagine much will be learned over the next millennium." She smiled at his startled look. "Elder Gothi told me of your... unique status. It does not seem so very impossible to me, though I have not the slightest idea how such travel could be accomplished."

Sam sighed, and drained the last of his tea. "That, Ingrid, makes two of us. For now, though, what can you tell me about any spices or herbs your people would add to fish?"

"I will answer that" she said, slyly, "if you will finish answering a question I asked you earlier."

"Which is?"

She took a moment to compose her thoughts, then continued. "It is unusual enough for a dragon to openly invite a human, especially one not well known to them, for a ride. For Skye to do so is unheard of. Yet, she extended you such an honor this morning. Why would you refuse?"

Though her gaze was openly curious, her tone was brittle. Sam gulped, only now getting an idea of how serious a faux pas he'd committed. He ran a hand along his collar, wondering why the room had suddenly gotten hotter in the last few minutes. "You... must have been standing there for a while" he muttered, staring into his mug.

"Long enough" she said, rising from the table. "I also sense the answer to my question is not for just any set of ears. Walk with me."

Her tone held a note of command Lieutenant Dashiell would have envied. Sam followed, quickly, feeling like every eye in the hall could see right through him. He was grateful to step outside again, into the cool sea-scented breeze and bright sunlight, amazed to see a sky without a trace of cloud.

The village itself was as busy as the proverbial beehive, the residents taking full advantage of the good weather. Hammer blows against wood and nails sounded, as repairs or remodeling projects were carried out, underscored by bellowed orders or good-natured

cursing. Dragons were everywhere, helping to lift or hold things in place. Sam glanced out to sea, and could just make out the colorful sails of the fishing boats in the distance. Clanking and metal-hammering sounds issued from what he assumed was Gobber's smithy, accompanied, periodically, by a peculiar hissing roar.

"Gobber is quick to take advantage of anything which eases his work" Ingrid said, as if she'd read the thought. "He has a Gronckle who helps him keep his forge going." She put a firm hand around his upper arm, and pointed with the other. "Come. I can barely hear myself think in this spot."

She led him in the general direction of the ramps to the harbor, and his first thought was they were heading for the beach. That notion was wiped out when Ingrid turned right before the ramps, onto a pathway leading to a bridge which spanned a wide gap between two stone plateaus. He could just make out a broad circular area on the other side, topped with what looked like smaller concentric circles of suspended chains.

Timbers creaked underfoot as they started to cross, the surface bobbing slightly with their combined weight. Sam tensed, but Ingrid was quick to reassure him. "I am in no great hurry to reach Valhalla" she said, with a smile. "It will hold."

"Wh... where are we going?" Sam asked, unable to keep a tremor out of his voice. \_Those sidewalls are getting damned low!\_

She pointed ahead. "There is something you need to see." She eyed him critically. "Are you ill? You look pale."

Sam gulped. He was finding it increasingly hard to keep his attention focused ahead " especially since both side-rails of the bridge had abruptly dropped away. The gap looked ragged, as though the tough timbers and supporting ropes had been stretched to their breaking point and beyond by something far bigger and stronger. "A log got loose from the last pile brought across, and caused some minor damage" she said, all too casually for Sam's taste. "It will likely be repaired before the next full moon."

'Minor' it might have been in Ingrid's eyes. To Sam, it felt as if the world itself were dropping away from under his feet. Vertigo surged up in him at the sight of the impressive chasm, normally obstructed by the side-rails, and his knees took on the consistency of water. He sagged, grabbing frantically for the nearest upright support and clinging to it as though it were surgically attached.

Somewhere, far away, someone was yelling something. He couldn't tell what, because his ears were too full of the rush of blood and the hammering of his heart. He certainly couldn't see anything, with his eyes squeezed so tightly shut it started a light show inside his head.

A sharp, cool, sweetish scent suddenly cut through the panic, washing it away like dust under a waterfall. He gasped, as every muscle he had suddenly went limp. Ingrid's voice echoed in his head as warm darkness rushed up to surround him. "Relax, Sam! I will not let you fall!"

It seemed only seconds before the darkness fled. He found himself sitting on rough ground, his back against a cool rocky surface. Ingrid's worried gaze nearly filled his field of view and he felt as limp as overcooked pasta. "Whatâ€"?"

This drew a relieved smile from the healer. "Welcome back. Are you all right?."

He sat up and drew a shaky breath. "Better, thanks. Iâ€" He broke off as she offered him a waterskin. He took a couple of gulps, then continued. "Did you give me something? There was a scent, like... well, like nothing I've ever smelled before. Sweet, like wildflowers, but cold as well, like really strong mint."

She nodded, reached into one of her belt pouches, and pulled out a pinch of coarse gray-green dust. "We call it \_logn\_ root. I usually use it to soothe frightened animals, but it works just as well on people. It may make you feel dizzy for a while, but it breaks through panic like nothing else I've tried." A quick breath sent the pinch into the wind. "Now" she continued. "Since I ended up having to carry you across â€" and you're heavier than you look â€" the least you can do is tell me what happened."

Sam leaned back again, and sighed heavily. "What just happened" he said, slowly, "is the reason I couldn't go with Skye."

Her eyebrows knitted themselves into an expression of utter confusion. "How is it you can fly higher, farther and faster, in your wondrous ship, than the strongest of dragons, yet crossing a simple bridge brings you to your knees?"

He flushed hot with shame. "What you tell me of this" Ingrid said, gripping his shoulder, "will be as one Healer to another. No others will know unless you tell them."

He looked into those eyes, filled with nothing but a sincere desire to help, for what felt like an eternity. Finally, he nodded. She let go, and settled on the ground, legs crossed in a half-lotus posture.

"Before I became a Healer" he began, "I was a technician â€" Blacksmith's apprentice" he amended, as she puzzled over the unfamiliar word. "One day, I was given the job of repairing some machinery which was located on the upper floor of a large building."

"The equipment was on a shelf above a narrow ledge which looked pretty flimsy, but I was told it was more than solid enough to take my weight. Built on top of a steel beam, the other workers said. And, at first, when I tried putting my weight on it, it really did feel that way."

"I'm going to make a guess" Ingrid said, one hand squeezing his reassuringly. "The 'other workers' who told you this were mistaken?"

Sam's eyes clenched shut for a moment at the memory. He regained control and nodded. "There was a short dividing wall between me and the equipment I was to work on" he explained. "I reached over to

bring the equipment closer, and dropped one of my tools. Climbing over the wall to retrieve it wasn't a problem, but when I climbed back over to the open side, I came down on the ledge harder than I thought.

"The next thing I know, I'm falling into the dark, no idea how far down I'm going, no idea what's in the way." He shuddered. "My first thought... well, feeling... was surprise. Second was 'Damn, I'm dead.' My last thought, before I crashed through the ceiling of a work space on the lower floor, was 'I'm not done yet!'"

Ingrid looked confused again. "Not done with what?"

Sam grinned, ruefully. "With living! Lots of people, myself included, believe we're on this world, in this life, for a definite purpose even if we don't know what it is. But we do know if we have unfinished business. And that's the way I felt!"

She smiled. "Your people and mine may be more alike than you think. Please, continue."

He nodded. "I ended up landing on top of someone who was sitting at their desk, eating lunch at the time, then onto the floor. I found out later the impact had... well... brought his face and his meal a lot closer than he expected!"

"Thankfully, neither one of us was badly hurt. He suffered a strained neck, and I got out of it with nothing more than bruises and a hairline break in my left shoulder." He looked away, and said in a whisper, "It could have been a lot worse."

Ingrid remained silent, sensing something more in the works. She was right. Sam looked back up, resignation in his gaze. "At first, I thought the damage was purely physical. But ever since that day, I've been afraid of unprotected heights. Put me in a room, or in the open with a solid barrier between me and the height, and I don't even break out in a sweat."

He nodded at the bridge, now safely behind them. "I wouldn't even have had trouble with your bridge if its sidewalls were intact. But open-air high places?" He shook his head. "Hell, Ingrid, I can't even climb most ladders without getting dizzy! The boarding ladder on my ship isn't a problem, because I have a solid surface in front of me, but anything else..."

"Like riding a dragon?" she said, perfectly serious.

Sam nodded again, sadly. "Please don't think I didn't want to! I felt horrible having to say no! It's just... at the time, I couldn't do anything else, and they all took off before I could explain..."

His eyes widened as he said this. "Oh, bugger! How do I explain? It'll be hard enough to tell Hiccup, but how in bloody blue blazes do I explain fear of heights to a dragon?!\_"

Ingrid got smoothly to her feet, then gave Sam a hand up. "That is something I cannot answer, Sam" she said, as he brushed himself off. "But, I can at least give you a place to start. Turn around and tell me what you see."

He did so and his eyebrows tried their best to climb into his scalp. He was looking down into a huge, rough-walled, circular pit, at least fifty meters across by six deep. The dark stone of its walls bore a generous assortment of pock-marks, indentations, and odd asterisk-shaped black splotches ranging from the size of his fist to massive swaths going halfway around the rim and a quarter of the way down. He puzzled over them for a moment, then suddenly realized what they were. "Scorch marks" he whispered.

Both horrified and fascinated, he walked closer to the concentric circles of rough iron chain surrounding the pit and stretching over its top, bit back his fear, and looked over the edge. The remains of massive wooden doors hung from the edges of a variety of caves, all different sizes. There were more scorch marks and, as he leaned over a little further, he could see the floor of the pit bore several large dark stains which, despite differences in color, looked disturbingly familiar.

Finally, he turned back to Ingrid. "Dragons died here" he said. It was not a question.

The Healer nodded, her own eyes reflecting an odd mix of pride and sadness. "And many of our people who made... mistakes... during the old style of 'dragon training.'" She sighed, and looked out over the ocean. "More death on either side than any Healer ever wants to see."

Sam thought about this for a moment, then shook his head. "Ingrid, I hate to break this to you, but... if this is supposed to make me feel better, it's a lousy job of it."

This drew a small smile from her, as she walked over and placed a hand on his upper arm. "There is more" she said, guiding him around the perimeter. They soon came to a spot where several of the chain rings had been literally burned away. Sam whistled softly, as he fingered the inward-turned end of one of the chains. Whatever hit it had sheared the end as neatly as a laser, and fused the remaining links stiff. "Looks like the result of a plasma bolt" he muttered.

"It was the result of friendship" Ingrid said, firmly.

Sam looked at her in surprise. "Say that again?"

She explained. In detail. How Hiccup had gone against everything he'd ever known, everything he'd ever been taught, and offered comfort to what his people had always considered a sworn enemy. How he'd tried to show the rest of the village the error of their ways "and nearly lost his life to the very dragons he cared so much about in the process. "Toothless saved him that day" she said, softly, "without a single thought for his own safety, or what might happen to him.

She fixed his gaze with hers, and started walking again. He kept pace. "Listen well, Sam Shay. There is no shame in feeling fear. Any warrior who claims to be free of it is either lying or gone mad. Fear is nothing more than a natural reaction to that which we cannot understand, or what we think we cannot control. What matters is what you choose to do in the face of your fear.

"You understand flight, after a fashion, and you understand heights. You are not afraid to fly to great heights in your ship, because you understand and control it. What, then, is the difference between controlling your ship and commanding your legs to take you over a bridge which will clearly support your weight?"

Sam shook his head. "The reasoning part of my mind knows it's no different, Ingrid. It's the deeper, unreasoning part which doesn't."

She shrugged. "So? It is your mind. Take responsibility for the power it gives you. Which part do you choose to place in control?"

"I'm not a warrior!" he said, more sharply than he'd intended. His innards were clenching up again.

"Truly?" she shot back, with some heat of her own. "What do you do for your tribe, each and every day? Do you not fight to protect and preserve that which you are given responsibility for?" She nodded at his gunbelt. "Do you not carry weapons, as well as healing? Are you not prepared to use either, as needed?"

Sam was startled. "I didn't... I mean, I never really thought..."

"Then you need to start thinking!" she snapped. "Not all battles are fought with axes and catapults. No two warriors fight in exactly the same way. The only thing warriors have in common is what they fight for."

She stopped, abruptly, and faced him, fists planted firmly on her hips. "You, Sam Shay, fight for the side of the Light. I knew this from the moment I first saw you, as did Gothi. It is a worthy battle, one which has been going on, in one form or another, since Time itself began. It is also a battle which you will lose, utterly, if you follow the path of fear without reason."

Sam blinked in surprise. He tried to reply, but his mind refused to provide any words. "Answer me this" Ingrid said, stepping closer. "Do you accept Skye as a friend?"

He gulped, then something deep inside took over. As if in a dream, he heard himself replying "Yes" with complete confidence.

Ingrid smiled. "Then trust her as one, as she has already trusted you! Part of being a good warrior is knowing when you need help and not being afraid to ask!"

She stepped back a pace, and waved an arm at their surroundings. Her smile widened. "Look."

Sam did so. His jaw dropped. Behind them, the bridge stretched away towards the former dragon arena. Ahead of them, less than a dozen meters away, were the ramps leading down to the boat docks. "You... we... how did you...?!" he stammered, his eyes wide with shock.

She laughed heartily. It was infectious. Sam found himself chuckling along with her. "Another important skill for any warrior" she said, "is knowing when to act before your mind can argue. I chose to walk.

You chose to follow."

A pair of enormous winged shadows suddenly passed over them. At the same instant, a familiar voice yelled down "Sam! You missed a great flight! We found where you wanted to go... meet you back at the house!"

"Be right there!" he yelled back, waving, as the two Night Furies executed a neat turn, wingtip-to-wingtip, and sailed back towards the chief's house. He turned back to Ingrid, who was still grinning mischievously. "About those spices?"

She nodded. "Salt, reclaimed from seawater, mint leaves, and a few prefer this." She reached into her cloak and brought out a small wood box, about ten centimeters square. Sam accepted it, lifted off the lid, and took a cautious sniff. A peppery brine-like odor met his nostrils, and he poked a curious finger at the shiny dark-green flakes filling the box's interior. "Kelp of some sort?"

Ingrid nodded again. "I think we both know neither salt nor mint leaves would be effective against whatever poison tainted our fish. This is the only other spice which might have been used."

Sam rubbed a few of the flakes between his thumb and forefinger, then carefully tasted it. Sharp, as he'd expected, but not at all unpleasant. In fact, the alkaline-peppery flavor stirred another memory. "Saint Blaise Above" he muttered, breaking out in a smile. "Ingrid, I think you just gave me a big hint..."

The village healer grinned and held out her hand. Sam gripped it firmly. "Share what you learn with me" she said. "I will need to know how to treat such a condition if something should happen to you. Gods be with you, Sam!"

She turned and walked rapidly away, her cloak billowing behind her. "And you" Sam muttered, his mind still working on how he had allowed himself to be distracted enough to cross the bridge as easily as he could guide his ship into Alladale's main hangar. Finally, he put the thought aside for future study and started back towards Hiccup's home at a brisk trot.

He made it about halfway before he had to slow to a fast walk. His hearing had started buzzing again, and the headache was back. \_ Enough already!\_ he thought, fumbling in a pocket for an aspirin patch. He found one, stripped the backing, and pasted it on the back of his neck. Cool relief flowed from it, pushing back the majority of the headache in less than a minute.

The buzzing, however, intensified. He noticed it seemed to get stronger whenever he passed close to a dragon, faded as he moved away. It grew particularly strong when a Zippleback flew overhead, each head taking its turn to gaze intently at him while the other watched where the body was flying.

Sam shook his head slightly, admiring the teamwork. \_Maybe two heads really \_are\_ better than one\_ he mused, chuckling softly at the thought.

\_\* They are \*\_ said one voice.



\_ \* You should grow another \*\_ said a different one, with what sounded like soft laughter.

Sam blinked. The Zippleback was already well past, out over the cliffs, and the buzzing faded. He stood, frozen in place for a moment, his mind in a whirl. Finally, he snorted to himself and climbed the last of the steps. \_Great\_ he thought, disgustedly. \_Add a month or so of head-shrinking with Doc Weaver to the schedule when I get back. She'll probably get a Nobel Prize out of what's piling up in my skull on this trip!\_

## 7. Chapter 7

\_Still getting nice reviews (thank you!). However, the last review did bring up a distinction I wanted to point out. Call it splitting hairs if you must, but I believe it is important.  
><em>

\_ "Mind reading" and "Mindspeech" or 'Telepathy' are NOT the same thing, not in any sense of the words! True mind-reading, as I see it, is sensing and being able to correctly interpret EVERYthing going on in the mind of whoever's being 'read' at any given moment; emotions, perceptions, ideas, random thoughts, bodily physical sensations, the works! \_

\_I don't see how this could possibly work, with any degree of accuracy, between two different species. While there would certainly be some degree of simple commonality, perhaps in the spatial perceptions (up, down, left, right, etc.), the more complex mental processes which go on routinely simply would not translate. To put it in a crude technical way, it would be like trying to use 64-bit hardware and drivers on an old 8-bit machine, like the original IBM PC.\_

\_Put more simply: Sam cannot 'read all the dragon's minds.' Nor can they all "read" his, or any other human. There is, simply, enough commonality in brain function to allow for simple telepathy, with some emotional overtones.\_

\_I can say, from personal experience, telepathy is nothing more than hearing the voice of whoever's trying to "talk" to you. It will, literally, 'sound' like it's coming through your ears as if they were standing right next to you and speaking out loud. The difference is they're not anywhere near you! In my case, the friend I experienced this with was standing nearly out of my sight at the opposite end of a crowded airport concourse, yet I 'heard' him as clear as a bell.

><em>

\_Such is the case with Sam and the dragons. Such a gift is, indeed, not very common. I believe it, and other talents, lie dormant within all of us (after all, we do only use about 10-15% of our brain capacity on average) but, like any other part of the body or mind, it will atrophy if it's not given regular exercise.\_

\_Enough jabber. On to the next chapter. Enjoy!  
><em>

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

## **\*\*Chapter 7\*\***

"\_If you surrender to the wind, you can ride it" (Toni Morrison)\_

Sam made it back to the house, went in, and started cleaning up his camping gear. Both Night Furies were conspicuously absent, so he asked Hiccup where they'd gone. "Hot spring" came the prompt reply. "Does wonders for sore muscles, and it's going to take Skye a day or two to get back in shape. That's the reason I was really surprised when she offered you a ride."

Sam winced at the unmistakable edge in Hiccup's tone, and a hot burst of annoyance surged through him. He forced himself to finish bundling his equipment, and putting it out of the way, before he replied. "Are you ready to go?" His tone was flat and calm.

Hiccup nodded, gulped down the last of the mug of water he'd been sipping, put the mug down on the table and headed for the door. "We need to fly northwest" he said, as they climbed up the aircar's boarding ladders. Sam was mildly surprised to see the cabin empty of draconic visitors, front and back. Hiccup eyed the scorch mark on the pilot's seat, and stifled a chuckle. "Well, at least it wasn't your face" he said, nodding at the half-melted spot.

The tension between them eased. "Nearly was" Sam replied, as they strapped in. Once they were in the air, he detailed the whole incident. By the time he finished, they were both laughing hard enough to hurt. "I wish I'd seen it!" Hiccup gasped, as he got control of himself. "If nothing else, the look on the blue one's face...!"

"I would call it 'priceless'" Sam said, with a grin. "How far northwest?"

"About fifteen minutes" Hiccup replied, after looking around. "Sam... can I ask you something? About this morning?"

The vet's grip tightened on the controls, and he felt the beginnings of another flush. He turned to look at Hiccup, who returned his gaze without flinching. Finally, Sam took a deep breath and made himself relax. "You may find this hard to believe" he said, "and I ask that you not tell anyone else. You see, I have this little problem with unprotected heights..."

Hiccup listened, his eyes getting steadily wider, as Sam spun out the whole story. "And that's why I couldn't take Skye up on her offer" he finished. "I wanted to... Damn, I really did! It's just... at that moment..." He stared out the canopy into empty sky, unable to say anything more.

Hiccup's first response was short and simple: "Wow..." After a couple of minutes of silence, broken only by the craft's drive and instrument noise, he spoke again. "How long have you had this... condition?"

"Fourteen years or so" Sam replied, grimly. "I've tried everything I can to get rid of it... hypnosis, mental therapy, meditation, even hang-gliding."

"Not everything" Hiccup replied, ignoring the unfamiliar words.

Sam turned to gaze at him in surprise. "What else is there?"

The teen rolled his eyes. "For a smart guy, Sam, you can be as dense as my father! \_Dragons!\_ You've seen how well Toothless handles himself in the air, and that's with me helping him. Skye's got all her fins! All you have to do is say 'Yes' and hang on!"

His gaze took on a faraway look, and he smiled. "It's... like nothing you've ever experienced before. Once you do it, you're changed. Forever. For the better."

Sam let out a long sigh. The memory of the hurt look on Skye's face suddenly surfaced, all too clearly. "I really messed up this morning, didn't I?"

Hiccup nodded. "There's still a lot we don't know about dragons, but we do know they take trust and friendship at least as seriously as we do. The best possible way to earn Skye's trust, once she gets over being mad at you, is to give her \_your\_ trust. She won't betray you! It's just not how they think."

Sam thought about this for a long moment. Ahead, and slightly to the right of their course, he could see a tall volcanic cone poking up out of a huge fog bank. "Is that where we're going?" he asked, as he flipped a series of switches.

Hiccup looked up and nodded. "Dragon Island. The fishing boats got blown just inside the fog line." He looked over at the vet again. "So, what are you going to do?"

"Water samples, definitely" Sam replied, as he cut their forward speed and dropped lower. "Given the presence of that volcano, I'm thinking my original theoryâ€"

Hiccup snorted. "I meant about Skye."

Sam chewed his lower lip before replying, in a near-whisper, "I don't know if I have your kind of courage..."

"Courage!" Hiccup shot back. "Sam, if that's all you're worried about, let me tell you what happened the first time I tried attaching a replacement fin to Toothless's tail!"

He listened as the aircar, now configured for water landing, settled onto the ocean's surface, the fog closing in around them. His jaw dropped as Hiccup described the chaotic and near-fatal first flight.

"Let me get this straight" Sam said, as he keyed commands into the ship's computer to prep and launch a sampling drone. "You were hanging off his \_tail?\_ And \_flying\_ like that?!" He found himself torn between utter disbelief and laughing out loud at the image.

Hiccup held up a hand. "I swear by Odin, it's true. And I was never more scared in my entire life! But in that one instant before we would have crashed, there was no time to think. I just... did what

felt right."

Sam shuddered. "Still sounds crazy. I think Iâ€"

"No!" Hiccup snapped. "That's your whole problem. You think too much! Haven't you ever just done something? Something which seemed crazy at the time, but worked out well?"

He considered this. "There's a time to think" Hiccup continued. "And a time to act.\_ The trick is knowing the difference."

An insistent beep drew their attention. Sam's eyebrows shot up at the sight of a massive image coming into focus on the underwater imaging display. "What in blazesâ€"

Only their safety harnesses kept them from being tossed around like dice in a cup as the aircar bucked violently. PROXIMITY ALERT flashed on the display in bright red, coupled with the blare of audible warnings. A heartbeat later, the craft was literally thrown several meters into the air, only to crash back down on the surface in a storm of water and steam.

Steam?!\_

"Scauldron!" Hiccup yelled, pointing. Sam followed the point, and caught a brief glimpse of a huge snake-like back, scaled in brilliant green, sliding smoothly under the surface. His jaw dropped. "Saints preserve us!" he gasped. "Isn't that the one you said couldâ€"

"â€"take on a pack of sea wolves, and win? Yes!" He shook his head, his eyes nearly bugging out of their sockets. "I don't understand why it's attacking, though. For all their size, they're not usually aggressive! I mean, they hate loud noise, but we're not making a sound!"

A double-chime sounded in the cabin, followed by the computer's voice. "Warning: Thruster tubes flooded. Automatic purge in progress. Engines disabled until purging is complete."

Hiccup blinked. "Sam? What was that?"

The vet had gone pale. "That was the ship. Part of its machinery lets it speak." He swallowed, eyeing the turbine status indicators. Pale blue highlighting surrounded the graphics representing both thruster tubes, changing slowly to black as the purge pumps made progress against the unexpected deluge. He tapped the display. "That first attack flooded the engines. We can't move until they drain!"

"Oh, great" Hiccup muttered, trying to look everywhere at once.

He didn't have to look far. Directly in front of them, less than twenty meters away, an enormous head lifted clear of the water. Sleek and streamlined, just as Sam would have expected in a water-dweller, with a tapered muzzle half as long as an adult orca. A pelican-like pouch hung below the lower jaw. Brilliant yellow eyes fixed the craft and its occupants with a baleful glare.

For all its size, and obvious irritation, Sam couldn't help but admire the powerful form. Far from being ugly, the creature carried

itself with a grace and dignity he'd seen only in the larger cetaceans. He suddenly remembered an ancient black-and-white flat photograph, taken over a century ago, near the still-infamous Loch Ness, and wondered if it might not have been more truth than legend.

Suddenly, the muzzle dipped into the waves, one eye remaining fixed on the aircar. "Oh, Hel" Hiccup said. "Sam, can we move yet?!"

He glanced at the engine panel. "Not for another minute."

"Then I guess we're going to find out how your ship reacts to being boiled!"

Up came the muzzle, pointing straight at them, the jaw pouch distended. A jet of steaming seawater hit them like an oversize fire hose, sending the craft skimming across the surface. Although the jet couldn't penetrate the hull or canopy, the heat from the blast overwhelmed the air conditioning, turning the cabin into a sauna. Sam cursed as blue highlighting flowed rapidly back over the turbine indicators, and the computer repeated its earlier warning.

"One more like that" Hiccup gasped, "andâ€"

"I know!" Sam shot back, one hand flying over the weapons panel. "I hate to do this, but I don't have anything which can knock out something that big without killing it. As it is, I'm not sure if a laser's going to be enoughâ€"

"Sam, no!" Hiccup reached across and grabbed the vet's arm. Hard. "Scauldrons are rare! This one probably has a family! Remember, we entered its territory, not the other way around!"

"Have you a better idea, then?" Sam yelled, waving towards the front of the craft. The Scauldron was coming towards them again, its head and neck clear of the water like a huge scaly submarine, kicking up a respectable wake. "I thought you said there was a time to think and a time to act. Seems to me this is a good time to act!"

He tried to pull his hand away. Hiccup wouldn't let go. "Scauldrons hate loud noises" he snapped. "In fact, it's about the only thing, other than trying to take their food away or threatening them directly, which would make one attack! Are you sure nothing we're doing is making loud noises?"

Sam shook his head violently. "No! Even the drone I launched depends on millimeter waves for navigation, not SONARâ€"

Sudden realization hit. With a burst of strength, he tore his arm loose from Hiccup's grip, reached for a seldom-used switch and flipped it to OFF.

The underwater view on the computer's display went black. Outside, the Scauldron suddenly slowed. A near-comical look of confusion came over its long face as it drifted to a stop, barely five meters from the nose of the craft. For nearly a minute, the huge serpentine shape just stared at them, its head bobbing slightly as it treaded water to stay in place.

A heartbeat later, the dragon executed a graceful backward flip, dove

beneath the surface and vanished.

Despite the stifling air in the cabin, Sam waited another minute before releasing the canopy. Cool sea-scented wind quickly blew away the remaining steam. He found himself shivering, not entirely from the drop in temperature. He leaned his head back against the headrest, eyes closed, breathing deeply and waited for the tremors to subside.

Hiccup wasn't doing much better. "Wow" he muttered. "I feel just like I did after Toothless pinned me for the first time, roared in my face, then let go."

The vet nodded. "And I think I finally understand what that must have been like for you" he said, still gasping slightly. He glanced at the turbine status display. The blue highlighting was nearly gone and, with the canopy open, he could clearly hear the whirring of the purge pumps and the gurgling of water being dumped overboard.

"I think we're done here" he said, as he sat back up and checked the sampling drone's status. The results were not a cause for celebration. "Bloody hell! It must have gotten knocked around by our scaly visitor... diving plane's jammed!"

"Translation, please?" Hiccup asked, eyeing the display curiously.

"It means" Sam growled, tapping repeatedly on a pair of keys, "the drone can't pull out of a dive. It's just going to keep going deeper until it hits bottom. I'm not equipped for diving, and even if I were I don't think I want to know how deep the water is out here."

He sagged back in his seat. "We're just going to have to collect the samples ourselves and hope that scaly steamer doesn't object."

"As long as we can do it quietly, he'll probably ignore us" Hiccup said, with just a little too much confidence for Sam's taste. "What was it you changed that made him stop?"

Sam pointed at the switch he'd thrown. "It's called SONAR. Sonic Navigation And Range. It sends out a series of loud clicks, and uses the returned echos to create an image of what's in the water." He looked over at Hiccup. "Switching the SONAR on is a reflex for me whenever I land on water, not even something I'm aware of doing, and I had no idea the beasties would even react to it. If you hadn't been here, I wouldn't have turned it off, and... well..."

Hiccup grinned. "You're welcome. So how do we collect these samples?"

Sam didn't get the chance to reply. The aircar was bucking again, though nowhere near as violently as before. Off to their left, the ocean's surface was shifting and rippling as if something was pushing water up from below.

In the same moment, the computer emitted a ping and said \_"Drone return in ten seconds."\_

Sam's jaw dropped as he checked and re-checked the ROV's status. "I don't believe this! The dive plane still shows jammed full-down, but

the thing's getting closer by the second!"

"Maybe your machine is wrong?" Hiccup suggested. This earned him a dirty look. "Hey, I'm just saying..."

Spray washed over them as a familiar form broke the surface. A moment later, before either of them could so much as blink, the Scauldron brought its sleek head in so close, Sam could have reached out and touched its muzzle without stretching. The dragon simply floated, calmly, eyeing them both with a gaze which held more curiosity than hostility.

After a minute or so, the dragon seemed to reach a decision. It snorted, then pulled its head back under the surface again. When it popped back up, the bulky yellow body of the sampling ROV was clamped firmly in its jaws, its propellers whining madly and its rudder clicking back and forth like a demented castanet.

"Don't just sit there staring" Hiccup hissed, giving the vet a shove. "Take it!"

Too dazed to do more than respond automatically, Sam unsnapped his safety harness, stood up, and cautiously stretched out his arms. The Scauldron dipped its head and opened its jaws, dropping the ROV neatly into the vet's grip. Sam just looked at it for a moment, then maneuvered it into the back seat and shut it down.

The Scauldron was still there as he stood back up. Sam was no expert at draconic facial expressions, but he thought the dragon looked... relieved? Even a little grateful?

Once again, something deep inside Sam took over. Averting his gaze, he stretched out one hand, palm up, in the same position he'd used to greet every other dragon he'd met. He heard a sharp intake of breath from behind him as Hiccup tensed, but the teen said nothing. The moment stretched on as Time itself seemed to take a breather.

A smooth, wet muzzle pushed gently against his hand. He looked up into bright yellow eyes nearly half his height tall. "Thank you" he whispered, running his hand along skin which felt amazingly dolphin-like.

The Scauldron blinked lazily, and a familiar rumble issued from its throat. Sam chuckled as the powerful vibrations ran up his arm.

A sudden bark sounded from the island side, deeply resonant. The Scauldron pulled back, opened its jaws, and responded in kind. It turned back to Sam for a moment, gave him a nudge which, though relatively gentle, knocked him back into his seat, then vanished smoothly beneath the surface.

The computer, as if on cue, bonged and said \_"Thruster tubes clear. Propulsion nominal."\_

All Sam could do, for the next couple of minutes, was sit there, replaying the scene in his mind and marveling at the obvious intelligence displayed by their aquatic visitor. "He could have smashed us to rubble" he muttered, shaking his head. "Instead, he brings back the sampler. Sweet Saint Blaise's bloomers, he \_drops it into my arms!\_"

He looked over at Hiccup, his gaze one huge question. The teen shrugged. "I'm just as surprised" he said, softly. "No one I know of has ever gotten that close to a Scauldron, and lived to tell about it. You, Sam, are the first." He eyed the vet with respect, and more than a hint of challenge. "You realize you've got no excuse now" he said.

"For what?" Sam asked, as he slipped his safety harness back on, closed the canopy, and started the engines.

"For not going flying with Skye. For Thor's sake, Sam, wake up! you just demonstrated the same kind of raw courage which kept my dad and most of the village's population alive during the battle with the Red Death. No one with guts like that would ever be afraid of simple heights!"

Sam didn't reply right away. The euphoria which had come from making peace with the Scauldron suddenly vanished, leaving a storm of self-doubt in its wake. He was so preoccupied, he advanced the throttles too quickly, sending the craft roaring into the sky at an angle far steeper than normal.

The near-vertical acceleration, coupled with a rapid transition from fog to sunlit blue sky, snapped him back to the moment and he cursed as he backed off on both lift and thrust. "Can we go back for my stomach?" Hiccup asked, weakly, as the ship leveled out. "I promise not to say anything more about fear of heights!"

"Sorry about that" Sam muttered, as he set a course for Berk and engaged the autopilot. "Hiccup, I don't know if it's that simple. It took a lot of work before I could even stand to fly this old crate."

"So it'll take a little more to fly on a dragon" Hiccup replied, insistently. "Sam, trust me on this. Trust Skye! \_It's worth it! \_If you don't want to do this for yourself, that's fine, but \_do it for her!"\_

Sam took a deep breath, let it go and looked over at his passenger. Green eyes holding nothing but sincerity met his. For a moment, he had a vision of another set of eyes, all storm-gray and slit-pupils, with flecks of rainbow trapped in them like giant opals. They hovered in his line of sight, reminding him all too vividly of the last moments of his dream.

He blinked, and the image faded. Finally, he managed a weak smile. "For Skye" he said, in a near-whisper, as his stomach gave an anticipatory lurch.

After the morning's excitement, the rest of the day was so near routine that Sam actually forgot, once again, how far from his own time and place he was. Upon their return, he wasted no time in setting up a bewildering array of analytical equipment on Hiccup's kitchen table, and putting it to swift use with tests on the drone's samples. "Can I help at all?" the teen asked, warily eyeing what looked like purposeful chaos.

Sam nodded and opened a sealed container about the size of a large stew pot. The briny stench of saltwater decay it released was



memorable. "Messy job, but important" he said, grabbing a handful of kelp fronds and hoisting them out of the reddish-brown water. "Set these to boiling, please?"

Hiccup eyed the mass dubiously, making no move to take it. "Will boiling make the smell go away?"

Sam considered this. "Probably not" he finally said, with a sigh. "In fact, it's liable to get worse. But, if I'm right, it means a cure for the rest of the sick dragons."

Hiccup muttered something which Sam didn't catch, then grabbed a large pot and motioned for the vet to drop the mass into it. The tangle of vegetation landed with a noisome splat. "If you're wrong" he said, wrinkling his nose and filling the pot with clean water from a nearby bucket, "\_you\_ get to clean it all up!"

He set the pot over the fire pit and stoked up the flames as Sam went to work on the rest of the samples. Over an hour later, he stood up and stretched. A gruff baritone suddenly exclaimed "Odin help us, what manner of devilry is all this? \_And what in Helheim's Gate is that smell?!\_"

Sam spun around, surprised to see his audience had grown from one to five: Hiccup, Stoick, Gobber, Ingrid and Toothless were all watching him with expressions ranging from fascination to uncertainty. Ingrid spoke first, a note of ironic amusement in her tone. "Isn't 'devilry' what you accused me of, Stoick, after I pulled that bad tooth of yours without you feeling a thing?"

The chief spluttered indignantly. Hiccup grinned, and Gobber chuckled. "Different Healers work in different ways" Ingrid continued. "I may not understand Healer Shay's tools, any more than he would understand mine. It doesn't mean his methods are any less effective."

This last was delivered with an unspoken query a dead man couldn't miss. "I would very much like to think that's true" he said, a little uncertainly. "In this case, I've found what caused the sickness and I think I've come up with a cure." He nodded towards the pot, which was boiling merrily away. "Sorry about the stink."

He held up two vials, both containing liquid. One was clear, the other a dark, dingy reddish-brown. "These are samples of ocean water. The clear one was taken just outside your harbor, and the dark one from the area around Dragon Island where Hiccup says your fishing fleet got blown into.

"The sample from near the island is dark because of..." He trailed off, struggling for words which would translate well into Old Norse. "...Because of a type of sea plant, called algae, which is so small you can't see it until it grows together in a huge mass. Normally, this particular type of algae can't grow in these waters because they're too cold.

"My tests, though, showed the waters around Dragon Island were much warmer than normal, and full of the minerals which this type of plant thrives on. As near as I can tell, the whole thing was set off when hot gas from the island's volcano escaped into the ocean, warming the water and providing more than enough minerals to trigger the growth.

The algae releases a poison called 'Brevetoxin,' fish eat the algae, accumulate the poison in their bodies, and the dragons get the poison when they eat the fish."

"So why didn't it affect more of us?" Gobber asked, jabbing a thumb at himself.

"Two reasons" Sam said, putting down the vials and picking up the box Ingrid had given him earlier. "First, the poison only accumulates in the liver and kidneys of the fish, parts which, apparently, not many people eat. Second is this spice, which Ingrid says some of the villagers use. It contains a natural antidote to the poison. I've got more of the same plants the spice comes from boiling, in order to help extract the antidote. In fact, I think it can come off the fire now."

This announcement was greeted by ill-concealed relief from everyone, Toothless included. Sam, who had been exposed to far worse odors in his career, barely noticed. He was too busy, after letting the mixture cool, straining off the thick layer of pale gold fluid which floated like oil on the surface of the remaining water.

After testing it for potency, he mixed it with a neutral carrier, then loaded the result into a series of injector vials. "One batch, Brevenol-D, ready to go" he said, as he snapped one of the vials into an injector and slung the rest in a bag over his shoulder. "Shall we?" he said, gesturing to the door.

Less than an hour later, it was done. Even Hookfang responded quickly enough to the homebrew medication to give Sam an appreciative nudge which sent him staggering.

"If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it" Stoick rumbled, as he walked with Sam and the others back towards the house. He clapped a meaty hand onto Sam's shoulder, paying no attention to the wince it produced. "Well done, Healer! Thanks to you, we've got our dragons back \_and\_ we know where not to fish!"

"Thank your son" he said, nodding towards Hiccup. "And, come to think of it, thank an anonymous Scauldron who recovered my samples."

The entire procession stopped dead in their tracks, and the chief's eyebrows climbed nearly to his scalp. "A \_Scauldron?\_" he bellowed, incredulously. "You crossed paths with a \_Scauldron?\_ And you're \_still here?!\_"

"It's true, dad" Hiccup said. "Not only did it recover his samples, it gave him a dragon's greeting."

Silence reigned for a long moment, then Stoick altered the group's course towards Mead Hall. "This sounds like quite a tale" he rumbled. "Let's hear about it over a tankard or three..."

It took a few more than three tankards, especially after word of the day's adventure started spreading. He and Hiccup found themselves repeating the tale, with a little creative embellishment each time around, to an audience which grew steadily in size and enthusiasm. Somewhere along the line, the impromptu yarn-spinning morphed into a full-blown party.

Sam assumed, at first, it was powered mainly by the fact all the sick dragons had recovered. That was certainly one reason. He quickly discovered, though, as his own blood alcohol level rose, the people of Berk simply loved a good party and would welcome nearly any excuse to throw one. At the time, given the ample food and drink being passed around, he was not inclined to argue.

His memory of the festivities grew a little hazy after a while, though he did recall demonstrating an Irish jig on top of one of the trestle tables. Not a bad effort, he thought, considering he hadn't done one since his teen years, he was still wearing his gunbelt, and the village's musicians knew only Nordic ballads.

Suddenly, the room quieted in response to a bellow from Stoick. "All right, everyone!" he yelled, his voice echoing in the cavernous hall. "Before we all fall flat on our faces, I'd like to propose a toast."

The bulky chief turned to look straight at the startled vet. "Your ways are strange to us, Sam, but we're not about to argue with the results! No matter where you came from, you've shown yourself to be one of us at heart. You'll always have a home here." He raised his tankard high. "Healer Sam Shay, you are of BERK!"

"SAM SHAY!" the others bellowed, as mugs and tankards went up all over the room. The vet raised his own in acknowledgment, but his guts suddenly tightened.

Just as suddenly, the room turned stifling. Air he thought, as he dodged and twisted through the crowd towards the big double doors, forcing himself to nod and smile at those who stopped to shake his hand or give him a hearty backslap along the way.

He made it outside to find the sun nearly down. Bands of deep orange and electric blue dappled the western horizon, and the air was turning nippy. He started towards the cliffs at a fast walk, a walk which became a jog moments later.

What in blazes am I doing?! he mused, not caring where he was going. I've got duties, people and animals depending on me, family... I need to be thinking about how to get home, not taking up residence over a millennia in the past!\_

Another part of his mind, one he didn't really want to accept the existence of, piped up with And how do you know you \_can\_ get back? You don't have a clue how you got here in the first place! You've been accepted here, and at least one very impressive dragon thinks you're worthy of her friendship. Do you want to just throw it all away on a theory?!\_

"Arrrrghh!" he groaned out loud, sinking to his knees and pressing clenched fists against his forehead. The buzzing was back, though thankfully without the headache. "And what in bloody blue blazes is happening in my head?!" he yelled.

The only answer was the rush of surf and cackles from a couple of seagulls. Slowly, he dropped his hands and opened his eyes. Somehow, he'd found his way to the top of a grassy bluff overlooking the ocean and the sunset. Behind him, torches were flaring up as Berk's

residents prepared for the night. As his heartbeat and breathing slowed to normal, he could make out faint sounds of laughter and cheering from Mead Hall. Apparently, the party was still in full swing.

He turned back towards the sunset, resettled himself into a cross-legged position, then concentrated on breathing deep and slow. \_In through the nose, out through the mouth\_ he thought, as his composure slowly returned. \_Watch the clouds, watch the colors. Relax. Expect nothing. Just \_be!

The tension slowly slipped away, and he felt a small smile cross his face. The buzzing was fading along with the tension. Soon, both were gone, replaced by a gentle, yet powerful, voice which said, in clear feminine overtones, \_It is beautiful, isn't it?\_

"That it is" Sam sighed. He blinked, surprised by a sudden thought. "I can't remember the last time I just took a moment to appreciate a scene like this" he said.

\_You are appreciating it now\_ the voice said. \_That is what matters.\_

He nodded, then turned his head trying to see who was there. "Ingrid?" he called. "Is that you?"

Amusement tinged the reply. \_She is still at the celebration. It is just the two of us.\_

"Two of who?" he muttered, unfolding his legs and swinging himself around on his knees. As he did, he came face-to-face with a familiar dark shape, opaline eyes gleaming in the last of the daylight. "Lady Skye!" he said, startled, then looked behind her and all around. His confusion grew as he found the rest of the bluff completely deserted. "I could have sworn someone was just talking to me" he muttered.

A sharp nudge drew his attention back to the Night Fury. She locked gazes with him, and once again a calm, strong, dignified voice filled his head. \_Someone was\_ it said, still sounding amused. One eye closed slowly in a draconic wink. \_You were not ready to 'listen' until a few moments ago.\_

It was a good thing Sam was already kneeling. He had only to drop his hands to the ground to stabilize himself as he felt the blood draining away from his face. "It's the mead" he muttered, shaking his head. "Gotta be the mead..."

He suddenly found himself flat on his back, one very large and well-clawed paw planted firmly on the middle of his chest. Storm-gray eyes flashed at him as Skye let loose a low growl. \_Listen well, Sam Shay! This has nothing to do with what you drank, or ate. This is real. My speaking to you is real. \_I\_ am real. If you are prepared to accept this experience as nothing more than the next step along a path you chose long ago, then accept it! The answers you seek will come easily enough, but \_YOU\_ must be willing to \_LISTEN\_ to them!\_

Sam gulped. Hard. Hot breath puffed into his face for emphasis, smelling like a cross between fish and the tang of hot metal, and human eyes held draconic for several long seconds.

The same calm confidence which had led him to reach out to the Scauldron suddenly flowed through him, and his muscles relaxed. Skye must have sensed it, for she removed her paw and stepped back. \_Good\_ she said. \_That was not so hard as I thought it would be. You learn quickly.\_

"Uhh... thanks" Sam replied, as he sat up, still processing the idea of speaking so easily to what most people would take for nothing more than a reasonably smart animal. "Lady Skye"

Her mouth twitched, and Sam felt more amusement in her thought-voice. \_Just 'Skye' will do\_ she replied. \_It is not my true name, but I have come to like it. I do appreciate the honor the title 'Lady' has in your mind, though.\_

This drew a hesitant smile from Sam. He found the whole idea of half-silent conversation getting easier. In fact, he was actually starting to enjoy it. An irreverent thought of \_Anne McCaffrey, eat your heart out\_ flashed through his mind. Some part of him, he realized, had always wanted to experience an intelligent but non-human perspective. The closest he had come to date were his brief meetings with dolphins and orcas.

True, synthetic languages had been developed which allowed basic communication with them, based largely on the work of the now-famous Dr. Lou Herman and continued by the work of Dr. Kanja Jumbe, but they couldn't hold a candle to the clarity and rich emotional overtones carried on Skye's mental speech.

"Skye it is, then" he said. "How is this possible? I mean, how does it work that you can understand my speech and I can... well, hear your thoughts?"

\_All dragons, and many other creatures, can understand human speech to varying degrees\_ she replied. \_And we have always been able to speak to each other in this manner. Few humans have the Gift any more. You are the first I have encountered, though the fledgling you know as 'Hiccup' is showing signs of developing it as well. It dates back to a time when all which lived knew a common language.\_

Sam nodded, but was still puzzled. "But how does it \_work?\_"

She gave a series of short, sharp chuffs, sounding like a hyperactive steam engine. Sam didn't need the amused touch in her mind-speech to recognize her laughter. \_Who can say? For me, it is enough that it works at all.\_

She backed up a few more steps, then made upward motions with her head. \_Stand, Sam Shay. We have unfinished business.\_

He gulped again, but did as she asked. He had a queasy feeling he knew what this 'unfinished business' might be. Sure enough, as soon as he was on his feet, Skye bent one front leg and mantled her wings. \_There is just enough time to see the sunset as it should be seen\_ she said. \_Seat yourself, as you have seen Hiccup do with Toothless.\_

Despite his earlier self-made promise, Sam hesitated. \_You fear\_ Skye sent, \_as you did this morning\_. \_Yet your fear is not of me.

Explain?\_

Sam winced as the memory flashed into his head, as clear as if it had happened yesterday. The horrible sensation of landing on what he expected to be a hard floor, only to have it disappear from under him, followed by sheer terror as he descended into utter blackness, the pain of his shoulder striking something hard, plunging through ceiling tile back into bright light, a sickening thud as he bounced off someone under him and slid limply to the floor, barely conscious...

The stream of memories stopped, and he realized he was panting as if he'd run up ten flights of stairs. Finally, he looked back up at Skye. "I'm so sorry" he whispered. "I \_wanted\_ to go with you this morning! I just... couldn't..."

He braced himself, fully expecting a rebuke for pointless fears. What he got was anything but. A wave of understanding caught him completely off guard. \_I was angry this morning, and hurt\_ she said. \_I will not deceive you about that. I understand the problem, now, but I have a question.\_

Sam met her gaze, unflinching. "The answer" he said, slowly, "is 'No.' I do \_not\_ want to be ruled by that fear for the rest of my life!"

Suiting action to words, Sam unlocked his gunbelt, tucked it in a safe spot behind a boulder, then walked rapidly back over to Skye. It took some doing, but he finally had himself settled on her back in a way which was comfortable for them both. A steady breeze had come up, blowing straight at them, and it was getting stronger. \_There may be a storm tomorrow\_ Skye commented, sniffing at the air. \_Are you ready?\_

He took one more deep breath, his hands firmly gripping her dorsal ridge. "As much as I'll ever be" he said, closing his eyes.

The wind chose that moment to provide a sharp gust. He felt Skye extend her wings, followed by a slight upward lurch, but nothing else. The wind continued to stream past him, bringing a sharp reminder of how cool nights could get in the northern latitudes, and he began to regret the lack of his jacket. "I said I'm ready" he said. "You can take off any time."

Draconic laughter echoed on the breeze. \_Open your eyes\_ she shot back. \_Dare to see what your fear does not want you to see, lest it lose its grip on you forever!\_

He snorted. "Nice speech" he said, as he opened his eyes. "How long did you practice â€" \_SWEET MOTHER MACHREE!\_"

They were flying.

The sun had set. Night had fallen. Stars dotted the sky, bright and hard as diamonds against the blackness. Sam gasped in wonder at the sheer volume of them. \_Now I really understand what someone means when they complain about light pollution\_ he mused.

Skye was climbing so gently, Sam had never even known they'd left the ground. What was most amazing was how \_comfortable\_ he felt! He

couldn't understand why, when the mere sight of the ground from this high up should have sent him into hystericsâ€”

That was it! \_He couldn't see the ground!\_ All he could see was darkness, broken by stars, a half-disc of moon â€” and the brilliant shimmering curtains of green, blue, purple and red which drifted across the darkest part of the sky, waving and twitching like an ocean of rainbows. His jaw dropped as he realized what, exactly, he was looking at for the first time in his life. \_The Northern Lights!\_

\_Welcome to my world\_ Skye sent, her mind-voice like the gentlest of summer breezes on his newly-awakened senses. He could feel her simple joy in what she was, what she was doing, and what was all around them. It mingled with his own, redoubled, became strong enough to drive away the last of the dark fear which had plagued him for so very long.

He heard someone laughing out loud, and suddenly realized it was himself. He closed his eyes and stretched out his arms, marveling at the sensation of wind slipping easily past and not feeling the least bit cold. "This is \_phenomenal!\_" he yelled at the top of his lungs. Once again, he felt Skye's laughter pulse through her sides, her mindspeech flowing with wry humor. \_Great Spirit of the Winds, I think he likes it...\_

Sam tried to find words, failed miserably. He felt Skye tilt slightly beneath him, and the stars and aurora wheeled around to their opposite side. "Is something wrong?" he said, suddenly concerned.

Her mindspeech held nothing but confidence, but Sam's veterinarian's sense picked up a subtle tremor in her wing muscles. \_Nothing I cannot handle\_ she sent. \_I was unable to fly for over seven sun-cycles because of the sickness. My muscles are still recovering... No! Do not dare to feel the slightest guilt, Sam Shay! I chose this path, just as you did. We both know what the result was. If anything, you should feel pride that you have conquered your fears.\_

He reached down a hand to stroke her neck. "Then at least allow me to treat your pain after we land" he said.

She chuffed eagerly in agreement, and started a gentle but swift descent. The bright flames of multiple torches came into view, and Sam could hear the crashing of surf against the cliffs. Suddenly, a double row of torches, spaced like airport runway lights, sprang to life atop the same bluff they had lifted from earlier. Skye dropped smoothly towards them, lining up exactly in the middle. A ghost of Sam's fear tried to rear its head at the sight of the cliff top, failed miserably as Skye touched down with barely a bump.

"Enjoy your flight?" Hiccup said, as he came forward into the torchlight, Toothless right beside him. He and Skye exchanged a nudge, then loped away towards the house. \_I expect you to be right behind us, Healer!\_ Skye sent, as they went.

Sam couldn't get the silly grin off his face, or the euphoria out of his system. He didn't much care. "Stars" he muttered, waving his arms in random directions as he went to collect his gunbelt. "So bright,

all over... and the aurora! Rainbows at night, this way, that way, every which way..."

He kept up along those same lines all the way back to the house, Hiccup's non-stop laughter providing a happy counterpoint.

## 8. Chapter 8

\_Welcome back, dear readers, for the next chapter! Without giving up any real spoilers, I'd be curious to hear from anyone who figures out what bit of SciFi stuff inspired my view of the portal and its markings. Guess correctly, and you can take a Berk Doubloon out of petty cash. :-)\_

\_And that's all I'm going to say on the topic. On to the next chapter. Enjoy, and thanks for reading!\_

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

### Chapter 8

"\_A journey is like marriage. The certain way to be wrong is to think you control it." (John Steinbeck)\_

The corridor was long, twisting and turning at random, and dimly lit, with an odd greenish cast over everything. Doors of every imaginable shape and size lined either side, each one adorned with the UNEC crest. The floor tiles were done in a black-and-white checkerboard pattern which became dizzying if stared at for more than a few seconds.

A voice suddenly boomed and echoed through the seemingly endless hallway. \_"RANGER SHAY, REPORT!"\_

Sam gulped, and started running. Or rather, he told his body to start running, and his point of view moved swiftly along, but there was no sound other than the fading echoes of Lieutenant Dashiell's all-too-familiar bellow.

The corridor ended in a huge archway. The edges of the opening were pewter toned, flickering here and there with twisting curls of bright blue energy like a Jacob's Ladder gone mad. In the center swirled a vortex of blue-gray mist, lit from within by more random lightning-like flashes.

Sam stopped, frozen by a bizarre mixture of fascination and utter terror. There was something familiar about the entire scene...

As if conjured by the thought, bright silvery lines started crawling across the perimeter of the arch, resolving into symbols as they went. Along with the characters came multiple whispers, each speaking a different language. Sam experienced a bizarre stereo effect, as two different voices sang the same words in languages he knew.

"\_When Dark and Light embrace,\_

\_And the Three dance as One,\_

\_The Traveler may offer Fire.\_



\_Then shall the Door open, \_

\_And the Path become clear." \_

The last phrase echoed like thunder in the Grand Canyon, the symbols filling his entire field of vision...

He sat bolt upright, gasping for breath, pulse racing. The night's chill gripped him as the upper part of his sleeping bag fell away. Other than Skye's steady breathing, soft snores from Toothless, and a pair of louder snores from upstairs, the house was as quiet as it was dark. Faint smells of roasted fish and wood smoke still lingered, reminiscent of the previous night's dinner.

Dark though it was, the image of the symbols he had seen in his dream burned bright in his line of vision, suspended in midair in a neat inverted 'U' as if they still retained their connection to the archway. Before Sam was fully aware of what he was doing, his hands had scooped up notepad and pen from his duffel bag, copying the symbols into permanent form. He worked feverishly as the bright lines slowly faded, driven by adrenaline and the sense of having grasped something terribly important.

The spell broke. He shivered slightly, glanced down at the near-invisible notepad, then swore and reached for his penlight. Revealed in the deep red glow was a near-perfect drawing of the arch from his dreams, all seven symbols around its perimeter as neat and sharp as if laser printed. \_Wow\_ he mused. \_Not bad for blind sketching. Now, what in blazes does it mean?!\_

It had been two weeks since his improvised cure had saved several of Berk's dragons from brevetoxin poisoning. Two weeks, and he had gotten no closer to figuring out how he'd slipped back 1200 years in time, let alone how to reverse the process. He'd spent hours each day "when he wasn't flying with Skye, learning the ins and outs of being a dragon rider" going over his ship's flight recorder logs, trying to piece together the exact sequence of events.

Unfortunately, whatever effect had stranded him here had also scrambled part of those logs. They were perfectly clear, right up to the point where he'd dodged the smuggler's plasma charge. The recording had chosen that moment to dissolve into a sea of video static and a sound like two angry cats fighting with steel drums.

It remained that way for exactly five minutes, then picked up with a view of a quiet ocean, a night sky just starting to go pale, and his craft's approach to what he now knew was Berk's eastern beach. EMERGENCY AUTOLAND ENGAGED flashed in red characters across the bottom of the screen from the moment the ocean came into view.

His memory had been no help either. He could clearly remember one of the smugglers firing at him, missing his ship but striking... something... Gerry yelling over the radio, then "nothing, until he'd woken up with the sun beating down on him.

Then, three nights back, the dreams had started. It was the same, every time. A long corridor, Lieutenant Dashiell's voice yelling at him to report, running...

And waking up, gasping for breath, unable to clearly remember anything more. \_Until now\_ he thought, as a sudden call of Nature prompted him to put the pad down and seek out the facilities. \_Until now.\_

Skye intercepted him just outside the house as he was coming back, her opaline eyes shining with excitement and his notepad clamped in her mouth. He winced at the sight. "Don't get it wet!" he said, reaching for it.

She snorted, and dropped it into his hand. It was bone dry. \_The way it smells? I would not touch my tongue to it if I were starving! Where did you get this?!\_

There was an urgency to her mental voice which startled Sam. "It's just paper" he stammered. "Something my people use to wrOWW!"

He flinched, rubbing at his arm where Skye's ear-flap had impacted. \_What you have \_drawn \_on the paper, silly fledgling! \_She all but snapped, her eyes blazing. \_Do you have any idea what these writings mean?! \_

"Oh! Right, sorry." He explained about the dream, and his sudden sense of needing to put it on paper before it faded. "Can we talk about this inside?" he added, rubbing briskly at his arms.

She turned without another word, and pushed through the door. Green-yellow orbs met Skye's, followed by a querying rumble. Her reply was much longer than normal, a series of soft grunts and growls, accompanied by nods towards Sam and his notepad. Toothless was silent for nearly a minute after she'd finished, his eyes focused on something only he could see.

Finally, he huffed, got up, grunted something at Skye and streamed upstairs as silently and quickly as an oversize cat. Before Sam could do more than marvel at how something as big as a Night Fury could move so quietly, Skye nudged him firmly in the side. \_Put on your outer skins\_ she sent. \_We must fly. Bring your drawing. There is something you and Hiccup need to see.\_

Sam complied, still confused but eager. He pulled on a clean jumpsuit, secured his boots, then started on Skye's harness and saddle. Muffled sounds of indignant protest suddenly issued from upstairs, accompanied by occasional draconic grunts. "...Ow! Enough already, you overgrown lizard! What's so important..."

Sam couldn't hold back a chuckle as he checked the straps, followed Skye outside and settled himself on her back. Doing so now seemed easy, nearly automatic, and he smiled as his memory replayed their second flight together. He'd been worried his fear might resurface in daylight, when he could see the ground.

Neither Skye nor Hiccup had given him the slightest chance to dwell on the idea. A spare saddle and riding straps had appeared as if conjured, and Sam had found himself being put through an intense lecture on dragon tack, harnessing, and how to handle himself in the air, all while gulping down a hasty breakfast. His concentration was not helped by occasional Murphy-driven thoughts of the whole thing being a 'crash course' in dragon riding.

Fortunately, the reality left Murphy solidly on the ground. Sam had barely settled himself on Skye's back when she had powered into the air. Before he could catch his breath, they were over a kilometer high and climbing like an arrow.

By the time she leveled into a smooth glide, he had been so caught up in the view of a sunrise which would have made the most jaded artist weep with joy, the ground just didn't seem all that important. Her heart-stopping takeoffs were now a normal habit, and he never tired of the rush of cold air, the whoosh of powerful wings, or the silent peace of her glide as she leveled out at her preferred altitude.

He found, if he stared at the sky and the sun-dappled sheet of the ocean long enough, it felt like they were holding completely still, floating suspended in time and space with nowhere more important to be than right where they were.

The only thing he still had problems with was aerobatics, though he loved watching the other dragons perform them. Skye had repeatedly assured him his tolerance would improve with time. \_You have been living in fear of simple height for most of your life\_ she would remind him, as she practiced corkscrews, loops and spins, and he practiced hanging on for dear life. \_Do not expect to be able to fly the Pillars with me in just a few suns.\_

The reference puzzled him, and he had asked Hiccup about it over lunch. For answer, the teen had taken him for a walk to a cliff overlooking the island's west side. The array of jagged rock spires and formations was unmistakable, and Sam felt a chill run up his spine. "You flew through \_that?" \_he gasped. "At \_speed?!"\_

Hiccup nodded. "Toothless and I had no choice the first time around, but now we do it every so often just to keep in practice. Once you and Skye can make it through, you will truly be a dragon rider. Trust her. She'll know when the time is right."

Sam gulped, hard, and reached hastily for a flask of mead he'd taken to carrying with him. "\_She'll\_ know?! Don't I get any say?"

\_You can say anything you like\_ Skye had chimed in, gliding low overhead, her tone utterly confident. \_It is my choice to listen, or not.\_

That was the first time Hiccup had ever seen mead spew from someone's nose.

By now, Sam was well used to Skye's mad rush for height. He concentrated on balancing his weight against her motions as she climbed rapidly, longer than normal, before heading due south. The dawn wind was cold on his face, a thick deck of stratus clouds adding their mist to the flight. A faint shout from behind and below drew his attention, and he turned to see a second black shape climbing rapidly in their wake.

Even at this distance, there was something about the pattern of Toothless's flight which told him, in no uncertain terms, how Hiccup felt about their impromptu excursion. The indignant expression on the teen's face, as they caught up, confirmed it. "What in Odin's name is going on, Sam?!" He yelled, as the two dragons matched positions and,

as one, picked up speed. "You don't need us along for every flight!"

For answer, the vet pointed to Skye. "Ask her!" He called back. "All she told me is there was something we both needed to see"

He broke off abruptly, realizing what he'd just said. Skye's telepathic abilities were something he hadn't intended to let slip, figuring he'd already presented Berk's residents with enough new ideas to last them several generations. The idea of dragons who could put words right into someone's head was, he felt, pushing things.

At first, Hiccup's reaction seemed to confirm the wisdom of such a choice. He blinked, shook his head, and called back "I must not have heard you right... \_She\_ told \_you?\_"

"Ahh... I'll explain later!" Sam called back, turning abruptly away. He felt Hiccup's gaze linger a few moments longer, then turn away. The vet cursed himself for speaking before thinking " again!

\_He will not forget\_ Skye sent, amusement coloring her tone. \_You must keep your promise to explain, no matter what, or you will never have any peace.\_

Now it was Sam's turn to blink in surprise. "He'll think I've gone half mad!"

\_Will he? Before you came, he also didn't think flying was possible without a dragon's help. Hiccup's Gift is going to emerge very soon. If he knows something of what to expect, and why it is happening, it will make things easier.\_ She turned her head to look back at him with one eye, and winked. \_As close as those two are, do you not also think he would welcome the ability to Hear Toothless?\_

Sam mulled this over for the rest of the flight. Which, as it turned out, wasn't very long. In a little under ten minutes, they were descending towards a tiny island which Sam estimated couldn't be more than a kilometer across at its widest point. Rocky and nearly bare of vegetation, surf crashing heavily against its sides, it looked as inhospitable as anything Sam had seen in his travels.

His opinion abruptly changed as they dropped lower, and passed over the top of a huge granite cliff. At its base, set squarely in the middle of the island, was a perfectly circular plateau which looked, to the vet's eyes, as neatly graded and flat as the airfield at any UNEC base.

Set exactly in the middle of the plateau, one side facing the cliff and the other facing due south, was the pewter-toned arch from his dream, seven glyphs around its perimeter.

Barely able to believe his own eyes, he dropped from Skye's back before she'd settled fully on the ground. He started walking towards the arch, pulling out his sketch as he went and checking the symbols and their positions against the drawing. Everything matched.

What he hadn't seen, though, was the sheer size of the artifact. Its opening was large enough to accommodate two UNEC aircars side-by-side, with room to spare, though the gap between the cliff and the portal's edge was little more than nine meters. \_Don't try to

fly through it at speed \_he thought, as he reached out a hand to touch the archway's surface.

Contrary to his expectations, it was slightly warm, glass-smooth and hard as diamond. At that moment, the clouds, which had been thinning steadily, broke apart. Sunlight gleamed off the arch, warming it further.

He snatched his hand back, startled. The thing had shocked him! Tentatively, he touched it again, discovering the same electrical tingle one would get from a nine-volt battery held against their tongue.

A voice at his side jarred him out of his thoughts. "You got me up early for \_this?!\_" Hiccup said, eyeing the arch with a sour expression. "What's so important about a weird rock formation on a speck of an island?! Toothless and I have flown over this thing a bunch of times, and so have others! No one's ever been able to figure out what it is, or why it's here, so it makes a good landmark for traveling south and that's about it."

Both Skye and Toothless cut loose with pulsing grunts of draconic laughter. Hiccup sent them a disgusted look. "And what do you two find so funny about it? I could have slept another couple of hours instead of freezingâ€"ow!" He broke off, one hand going to his temple. "Great" he muttered, rubbing at the spot. "Just the time for my head to start feeling like an overturned beehive! Sam, got anything for a headache?"

The vet glanced at Skye. She nodded. "Actually" Sam said, reaching into his pocket for an aspirin patch and peeling open the wrapper, "I do, but there's something you need to know." Both dragons settled close by, Toothless gazing intently at Hiccup, Skye taking a position where she could watch them all. "Let me guess" Sam began. "You've been hearing noise in your head every time you've been close to a dragon? And the noise comes with a headache?"

Hiccup's jaw dropped as Sam stuck the patch to his neck. "How did youâ€"?"

"Well, lad, it's a bit complicated..." Sam took a deep breath and launched into a detailed explanation, starting from when he'd first 'heard' a Zippleback speak, though he'd had no clue at the time where the voices were coming from.

Hiccup listened attentively, his expression shifting from disbelief to worry and, finally, confusion. He turned to stare at Toothless, who gazed calmly back. "So let me see if I've got this straight" he said, turning back to Sam. "Skye understands you. And she can talk to you. In your head. Without making a sound."

He nodded. "OK" Hiccup continued, with another glance at Toothless. "And the noise in my head, along with the headaches, is happening because I also have this... Skill? Talent?"

Toothless had ambled closer and stuck his head under Hiccup's left arm. Before Sam could reply, and much to his surprise, a new voice sounded in both their heads. Strong, a bit playful, patient â€" and most definitely male. It reminded Sam of a long-dead film actor, Peter Strauss. \_\*\*The word is 'Gift.'\*\*\_

Hiccup's eyes bugged. He stared at Toothless, who nodded once and huffed. `_**Not bad for an 'overgrown lizard,' hmm?**_`

All the teen could manage in response was a whispered "Oh, man..." as he sagged against his friend's neck.

The next few minutes flew by in a four-way hurricane of questions, answers and stunned expressions, frequently interspersed with "How am I going to explain any of this?!" and "Nobody's going to believe it!"

As the verbal and mental storm dissipated, Hiccup remembered his initial complaint. "Don't get me wrong" he said to Toothless, after a lengthy and silent stare out over the ocean. "It's great to actually talk with you, but I get the feeling we're here for a different reason."

The dragon nodded towards his mate, who was sitting on her haunches next to Sam. `_**That is for Skye and Sam to tell us**_` he replied, his tail tip switching back and forth.

`_And Sam can start by showing you his drawing_` Skye added, with a nudge at the vet's shoulder. He unfolded the sheet and held it up. Hiccup looked it over. "Nice job" he said, still puzzled. "I didn't know you were a Scribe as well as a Healer."

Sam coughed. "I'm not, actually" he said. "I think what you're missing is `_when_` I drew this." He went on, explaining his recurring dream. "I've never seen this island, or this... artifact... until this morning."

Hiccup took the sketch, then stepped back and compared it to the arch for several minutes. When he handed it back, his eyes held a new respect for the vet. "You're a Seer" he said, softly.

Sam snorted. "Hardly! If I were, I would have foreseen coming here, and I would have..."

He broke off abruptly, realizing where he'd been about to take the thought, then met Skye's gaze. It held a mix of understanding and sadness. `_Would you?_` She sent, to him alone. `_Would you truly have stopped yourself, if you knew what was coming?_`

"Would have what, Sam?" Hiccup asked, his tone completely normal.

He coughed. "Been able to understand these glyphs" he finished, pushing the original thought as far down his mental black hole as it would go. "Apparently, Skye recognized them." He nodded at his draconic companion, who huffed in agreement. `_There are stories told among our people_` she sent, her gaze taking them both in. `_They tell of others who knew the secret of riding the High Winds between the worlds._`

`_**Some **_`Toothless added, `_**believe our people â€" all dragons â€" came to this world by way of the High Winds, and their Doorways. This â€"***_` He nodded at the archway `â€" _**is one of those Doorways, and the writing is that of the Builders.**_`

Skye picked up the tale. `_Now you know why we brought you here. No`

matter what you may believe of yourself, Hiccup is right: You have a Seer's Eye. There is no other way you could have known this Door was here.\_

Sam felt his pulse start to pick up as a line from an old collection of stories he'd read in his teen years came to him. "'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth'" he quoted, softly, in English, then pointed squarely at the arch. "This has to be how I came here" he said, switching back to Norse. "It barely took us ten minutes to get here by dragon, which means my ship could have covered the same distance in less than half that."

He grinned broadly. "This could be my way home!" he said, excitedly, turning to the two dragons. "So what does the writing mean?"

They both looked startled. \_\*\*You do not \*\*\_\*\*know?\*\*\_ Toothless replied, his eyes going nearly all-pupil.

\_We were waiting for \_you\_ to tell \_us! Skye added, her gaze flicking between the arch and the two humans. \_Knowledge of the Builders, and their language, has been lost for more sun-cycles than any can remember. When I saw your drawing, I thought it meant you already knew of them. To recover even a fragment of their knowledge could have answered many questions! \_

For nearly a minute, the only sounds were the gurgle of the waves, faint calls from seabirds, and the wind gusting across the plateau. Sam felt like a giant hand was gripping his chest, squeezing every trace of breath from it.

The hand opened. A tremor started in his guts, bubbled upwards, and burst out in a giggle. The giggle turned into laughter, gentle at first, but rapidly growing in strength. After a few moments, Sam's legs collapsed. He dropped to his knees, then the ground, howling with mirth until his entire body shook with the force of it.

Hiccup, who had been uncertain whether to join in whatever the joke was or make a hasty escape with help from Toothless, suddenly realized what was happening. He crouched down and grabbed the vet's shoulders, shaking him hard. "Sam! Stop it! Get hold of yourself! Odin's Beard, you'll go mad if you don't! STOP LAUGHING!"

If anything, the laughter got stronger. Suddenly, a large black head pushed Hiccup firmly away. \_I will deal with this!\_ Skye sent, as she leaped on top of Sam, grabbed him in her front legs, and sprang into the air in the same motion. She disappeared over one side of the island. Toothless's ears twitched at the sound of a faint splash, and Hiccup's eyes bugged. "Did she justâ€"

His friend rumbled softly. \_\*\*Never annoy a female, especially when they expect something of you!\*\*\_ He replied, soberly.

Hiccup gulped, remembering all too clearly what Astrid's reaction had been when she'd first discovered him and Toothless at the hollow. "No argument there" he muttered.

Sounds of a struggle floated up on the breeze, along with an indignant bellow of "â€trying to drown me, you oversized black bat?! What in blazesâ€!"

The sound was cut off abruptly by more splashing. A heartbeat later, Skye swooped back over the plateau and dropped off one very wet and thoroughly chastened UNEC field vet. He landed with a none-too-gentle splat, got to his knees, and started coughing. Skye landed barely three meters away, and shook herself from nose to tail fins. Cold seawater and particles of kelp sprayed everywhere.

Her eyes fairly blazed as she went nose-to-nose with Sam, and her mind-speech carried a note of not-so-distant thunder. \_I had not planned on another swim so soon. Do you have control of yourself, or must Iâ€" \_

Sam sat up quickly enough to throw off some of his own soaking, and raised both hands in surrender. "No! No, no, not at all! I'm fine! Perfectly all right..." He coughed again, several times. "Completely normal to go for a swim in a cold ocean in early spring! Builds character, it does!"

He looked around, wiping his eyes and blinking furiously. As his gaze settled on Hiccup and Toothless, they both started looking more than a bit nervous. "Ahh" Hiccup said, gesturing towards the opposite end of the island. "We'll just go see about some firewood..." \_

The two took off running. Skye chuffed in satisfaction, then locked eyes with Sam once again. He looked away, flushing bright red with shame. \_I am glad to hear such things build character\_ she sent, completely ignoring the sarcasm. \_You seem to need quite a lot of it. Do you understand why I did this? \_

He just nodded, miserably. "I... lost it" he whispered.

This drew another snort. \_That is an excellent understatement. I had no idea it was so easy for humans to descend into madness! Are your minds truly so fragile? \_

Sam's eyes snapped up to meet hers. He flushed red again, this time with anger. "Fragile?! Was it 'fragile' minds which built an empire out of Rome? Was it 'fragile' minds which built the Egyptian pyramids? Was it 'fragile' minds which sent us to the moon, and Mars?!"

\_I have no idea\_ she snapped back. \_Since I see, from your thoughts, all of those things happening in times to come, there is no way \_either\_ of us can know if they will still happen. Does not the future change, from one heartbeat to the next? Does not your presence, here and now, spark change, just as fire starts from the smallest of embers? \_

A chill went down Sam's back, and it had nothing to do with his still-wet condition. His anger cooled, replaced by a flood of panic. "Sweet Saint Blaise" he muttered, cradling his face in his hands. "Lord only knows what will happen because of me..."

Skye rumbled again, this time with amusement. \_If, by 'Lord,' you refer to the Great Spirit, Lady of all Winds, you are right. She alone knows what the future holds. She gives to all Her children the Gift of free choice, but no Gift comes without a price. She causes us to live with whatever changes our choices may bring. The knowledge of what we choose to do, and how our choices affect others and the world



we all share, stays with us through all our lives.\_

Sam gulped. Hard. "But what if I completely ruined my own future through what I've already done? What if everything I left, everything I've known â€" damn, every\_one\_ I've known â€" is gone because of what I've done here and now? I'm not part of this time, this place. Hell, I won't even be \_born\_ for a thousand years yet! What if I've already destroyed my own time?!"

\_And what if you have not?\_ came the cool reply. \_What other choice could you have possibly made, given who and what you are? Would you rather have done nothing, out of fear for what might have been?\_

Her gaze held his, and he was unable to look away. \_I would have died\_ she continued, softly, \_as would others. None of our kind fear death as such â€" it is merely part of a greater cycle â€" but death without purpose is a terrible thing. Were it not for you, our human friends would never have known what took us from them. They may never have known what the signs of danger were.\_

He shivered again, this time from real cold. Skye extended a wing, and he gratefully accepted the warm covering. \_If you follow your own reasoning\_ she continued, turning her head far enough to keep an eye on him, \_the time you return to may be completely different â€" or no different at all. You cannot know until you return.\_

Now it was Sam's turn to snort. "\_If\_ I can" he said, gazing out at the sea and sky. "I may have found the door, thanks to you, but I still don't know how to open it!"

Her wings raised briefly in a draconic shrug. \_You will discover how. If you truly wish to return, you will find a way.\_

Sam looked sharply up at her. The emotion behind her last few words had not escaped him. "If you're so hopeful I'll not find a way home" he said, "why are you helping me? You could have just ignored the drawing. I would never have known."

She sighed gustily, and her wing tightened around him. \_All Life moves in patternsâ€"\_"

"Oh, no you don't!" Sam snapped, shrugging off the wing and turning to face her, head-on. The wind bit into his still-wet jumpsuit, sending icy fingers up his backside. He barely felt it.

"No more philosophy, no more mystic speeches! You don't want me to go anywhere other than back to Berk!"

Much to Sam's surprise, she managed to look pained. \_Do I hide it so poorly? And is it truly such a terrible thing to want? As Toothless is my mate, you are my human companion of choice. No other has seemed... right... to me.\_

She looked away, up into the sky, for a long moment. Finally, her gaze turned back to Sam. \_I help you because it is the right thing to do. The choice to go or stay must be yours alone, even if it is not truly what I desire.\_

She extended her wing once again. \_At this moment, you have a choice of remaining cold, or allowing me to share my warmth. You know what

is best for yourself, and I will support whichever path you choose.\_

Sam was still simmering with enough annoyance to consider staying right where he was. A particularly strong gust of wind changed his mind. Wrapping both arms around his chest, he ducked back under the shelter of Skye's wing. "You can be damned annoying when you're right" he muttered.

\_Thank you!\_ \_That is the nicest thing anyone has said to me in a moon!\_ She rumbled amusement.

Try as he might, Sam couldn't stay angry. He grinned, slowly, relaxing in the considerable warmth radiating from his friend. "Oversized bat" he grumbled.

\_Hairless ape\_ she responded in kind, pulling him a bit closer. He didn't push away this time.

After a few minutes of blissful quiet, broken only by wind and wave, a scraping noise caught his attention. He turned to see Toothless dragging most of a tree in his jaws. Hiccup followed close behind with an armload of smaller twigs and branches. "The only tree we could find as far as either of us could see" Hiccup said, dropping his load on the plateau and jerking a thumb in Toothless's direction, "and he has to uproot it."

\_\*\*The way it tastes, it was more than half-dead \*\*\_the dragon countered, spitting out the growth with obvious relief. \_\*\*Try it yourself if you don't believe me\*\*\_.

Hiccup winced and backed up a couple of paces. "Just light it, please?"

Sam was caught completely off-guard by the small but brilliant blue fireball Toothless spat at the pile. It exploded into flames with barely a wisp of smoke. \_Good control\_ Skye commented, opening her wings so both she and Sam could enjoy the heat.

Sam eyed the roaring fire uncertainly, even as he edged closer. His jumpsuit was now drying very quickly. "Ahh... just how big do those fireballs get?" He'd seen other dragons spit fire by now, to be sure, but never in so tightly controlled a form or with such concentrated power!

Hiccup and Toothless exchanged sly grins. Skye groaned and rolled her eyes. \_You had to ask, didn't you?\_

Toothless promptly spun around so he was facing away from the group. \_\*\*This is small\*\*\_ he sent, making a barely-audible popping noise with his mouth. An orange-yellow blob of fire, about the size of a golf ball, streaked into the wind and vanished against the cliff face in a puff of blue smoke. \_\*\*Middle-sized is what I used to light our camp fire\*\*\_ he continued, turning to face offshore and nodding at a good-sized pillar of rock about sixty meters away. \_\*\*And this is what happens when I really mean it!\*\*\_

He took a huge breath, then spat sharply. The burning sphere was about the size of a small beach ball, nearly too bright a blue to look at. It whipped across the sea towards the pillar, struck

it...

The flash blinded Sam for a few seconds. Before he could blink away the spots, the shock wave hit with a thunderous boom and a rush of summer-like heat. When he could finally see again the only thing left of the rock was an irregular square, barely visible above the waves, looking as clean as if it had been cut by a mining laser.

"Sweet Mother Machree" he breathed, his gaze flicking back and forth between a very smug-looking Night Fury, his proud rider, and the blast area. "If you wouldn't mind" he said, thoughtfully, "I'd like to examine your mouth and throat later on, then take some measurements to see how hot your fire really gets."

Toothless looked suspicious. \_\*\*It won't taste bad, will it?\*\*\_

Sam chuckled. "Not unless you think my hand will. I promise to wash up first."

Skye snorted in annoyance. \_Are we done, here? I think we all missed breakfast.\_

The flight back was uneventful, as was the rest of the day. Sam spent part of it asking questions of Gothi and Ingrid, trying to find out more about the Builders and seeing if either of the wise-women recognized the symbols. His remaining store of hope drained away all too quickly when neither of them did. He went as far as showing the glyphs to Gobber and Stoick, but neither had any more knowledge on the subject than the elders (though both were fascinated by the concept of paper, and asked for a few sheets apiece).

"One possibility, Healer" Stoick rumbled, running thick fingers through his expansive beard. "Trading season is coming. If ye make me some copies of yer writing, I'll send them out with our ships an' see if we can find someone who knows what they mean."

Sam winced. "That'll take months!" he complained. "If you can just tell me where your trade spots are, I can get there in my own ship in less time than it takes toâ€"

"Get turned into a sword practice dummy?" Gobber commented. "Or would ye prefer testing the edge of an axe the hard way? Aye, yer ship seems strong enough, but how long would ye last once ye set foot outside it? As ye would have to, if ye wanted answers."

Sam looked startled. "Your trading partners attack on sight?"

"They do if they think a demon has come among them" Stoick rumbled. "Healer, think it through: The only thing which stopped me from takin' yer head when ye first landed was Hiccup's introduction, an' we're used to the unusual around here. Ye try to land that flying metal... thing... anywhere else, and ye'd be cut down before ye could climb down. As it is, I'll need ye ta' hide it when we have other tribes visitin'. Hiccup can show ye where."

Dejectedly, the vet thanked the two men, gathered his notebook and supplies into a day pack, and hiked off into the forest, heading for the hollow Hiccup had told him about a few days ago. "It's where Toothless and I met" he'd said. "Very quiet, very peaceful, almost as good as flying. Great place to clear your head."

I hope so Sam thought, as he pushed his way through the undergrowth. The days were getting progressively warmer, a sign of the summer to come, and he soon found himself wiping sweat out of his eyes more often than he'd expected. Insects hummed, birds chirped and squawked, and the air was thick with the scent of pine, fir, and new flowers.

Despite the detailed directions Hiccup had given him, he nearly missed the entrance to the hollow. The sound of dripping water drew him through a concealing screen of fern fronds, then down a steep slope. He knew it was the right place because the upper ledge still bore signs of Toothless's original crash landing, including a few lengths of rotting rope scattered on the ground near a large boulder.

Five minutes of investigation and subsequent rock-climbing brought him into the hollow itself, and he gazed around in wonder. Though the forest had certainly been lush enough, with the approach of summer, the greenery before him made it seem like an arid desert by comparison. A riot of ferns, moss, grass, trees and shrubs bordered a small lake which was so still and clear, Sam could see the entire landscape reflected in it as a perfect mirror image. Fish moved lazily beneath the surface, intent on their own affairs.

A soft splash from one side of the lake caught his attention. He turned to see a tall bird wading slowly through the shallows, its bright yellow eyes intent on the surface. Heron he thought, noting the sword-like beak and long flexible neck, but which one?

It was rare for a UNEC Ranger not to recognize any creature they saw. More so for Sam, as he had a near-encyclopedic memory for species and subspecies. It was one of the few things which made his coworkers envious.

This particular bird, though, had him stumped. Its wings sported an outer layer of fine gray-black feathers, with deep chestnut tones on the forward edges. The chestnut shading changed to reddish brown on the sides of the bird's neck, bisected with deep black stripes. The top of its head sported a neat black cap over white facial feathers and its beak, like its powerful legs, was yellow.

Frowning slightly, Sam fumbled in one of his jumpsuit's pockets and took out a device which looked like a cross between a fat pocket calculator and an early-2000's "smart" phone. He pressed his thumb firmly on a depression in the unit's side, and it clicked open to half again its original length, revealing a camera lens built into the top section. Aiming the lens at the bird, and centering its image on the HD OLED screen, he touched a red button.

The image on the screen froze, and Sam touched a green key labeled SEARCH. The image split in two, original on the left. On the right, a blur of similar images flickered by, too fast for a human eye to follow. Green tracer lines flicked on and off across both images, highlighting characteristics of the original as the scanner tried to match it to the contents of its voluminous memory.

A little more than ten seconds later, the unit beeped affirmative. Sam gasped as the display scrolled out its results.

PURPLE HERON, *\_Ardea purpurea purpurea\_*. *\_IUCN RED LIST STATUS:*  
*EW*

Seconds later, the unit beeped again and produced another message in bright red: USER ALERT: REPORT THIS SIGHTING TO UNEC COMMAND IMMEDIATELY!'

Sam snorted in disgust, closed the scanner and returned it to his pocket. The heron, startled by the sound, eyed the two-legged intruder warily. "Relax" the vet muttered, as he backed slowly away, still admiring the bird. "Just don't see you fellows in my time..."

The heron watched a moment longer, then returned to its fishing. Sam settled down on a sun-warmed rock, pulled out his notebook, and started copying his original drawing. "'Report this sighting immediately'" he muttered, as he worked. "Aye, that'd be a good trick."

Despite not wanting to admit it, he knew Stoick and Gobber had been right. Even if he stood a chance of learning enough to get home, it wasn't enough to offset the risk of what the reaction to his aircar's appearance would be outside of Berk. *\_Capture, at best\_* he mused, tracing the arch and its symbols. *\_Not even a SmartLaser can hold off more than a half dozen or so. And what if I killed someone who happens to be one of my ancestors? Or managed to spark a war?\_*

A splash made him glance up. The heron had speared a trout, and was quickly dispatching it. Sam grinned slightly as he watched the outline of the unlucky swimmer slip neatly down the bird's neck, then turned back to his work.

Minutes stretched into tens of minutes, then into hours. Somewhere in those hours, Sam had stretched his stiff muscles and taken a lunch break "€" only to drift off in the sun's warmth shortly afterward. A gentle breeze flapped his notebook's pages like errant butterfly wings, providing a counterpoint to the vet's snores.

He woke with a start to air which was much cooler, and to a sky which was rapidly darkening. "Bloody hell" he muttered, looking around dazedly. Then he remembered where he was, got up with a grunt, and started gathering his things. A familiar whooshing noise heralded Skye's arrival. *\_I thought I might find you here\_* she sent, nudging him affectionately. *\_What have you been doing with yourself?\_*

"Copying my drawing" he said, as he stuffed the notebook into his pack and pulled out a light jacket. "Stoick says he'll send out the copies with the trading parties, see if anyone recognizes the symbols." He paused in his packing, and met his friend's gaze. "You may get your wish after all" he said, reaching out to rub her lower jaw, his insides clenching and quivering in a mix of joy and resignation. "If no one has known about the Builders for as long as you say, I may never figure this out." He waved one of the copies, then shoved it into the pack.

*\_You will never lack for friends\_* she assured him, purring at the rub, her eyes glinting with mischief and anticipation. *\_I can show you things you have never imagined!\_*

He chuckled as he shrugged into the jacket and slung his pack, feeling more optimistic than he had in days. "For now, I'll settle for a ride back to the village. There'll be an extra salmon in it for you."

Moments later, he was admiring the stars from half a kilometer above the earth, Skye's lazy wingbeats showing she was in no hurry. A curious thought struck Sam, one he had to voice. "Skye, do dragons use the stars to navigate? To find your way?"

\_In part, yes\_ she replied. \_We also use scent, the winds themselves, and another sense I do not know how to describe. Do you know your way by the stars?\_

Sam nodded. "Even with all the technology we have, we still have to learn at least the basics." He looked around, then pointed at an X-shaped constellation, with a brilliant blue-violet star in the upper left. "That one's called Cygnus, or the Swan... let's see... There! See that diamond-shaped one with a tail? That's Lyra, and the bright star on its tail is called Vega."

Though he couldn't see Skye's smile in the dim light, he could certainly feel it in her thoughts. \_Dragons call that one 'The Singer,' while the one you call the Swan we know as 'Defender of Winds.'\_

She banked left in a smooth turn, then leveled off again. \_What do you call the one just above my left wing?\_

Sam looked hard for a moment, counting the bright points of light, then laughed. "That's a trick question, right?"

\_Not at all\_ she replied, her tone more serious than he expected. \_Please tell me what you know it as.\_

Now it was his turn to smile. "I know that one as 'Draco.' Latin for 'Dragon.' But you knew that already, didn't you?"

She turned back towards the village, and dropped lower. He felt a warm mental undercurrent on her reply, as well as a sense of... relief? \_I did, but it is not important. I am greatly pleased people of your time remember us, in whatever small way.\_

She touched down with barely a jar, right next to Stoick's house. Sam climbed down and simply stood there, quietly, gazing at what was left of the sunset. Suddenly, he spun around. Skye grunted in surprise as he threw both arms around her broad neck and hugged, hard. "If I get home" he said, in a whisper, "everyone will know about you, and I don't care if they believe me or not."

Skye lowered her head to rest gently on his shoulder, purring thunderously. Suddenly, a jolt went through Sam as if he'd touched a live power line and his eyes bugged. Pulling away, he fumbled for his penlight and his original drawing, dropping a flurry of aspirin patches, cotton swabs, Ricolas, and various other junk in the process. "It couldn't be that simple!" he muttered, as his hands flew over his various pockets and pouches.

\_Sam? What is wrong?\_ Skye asked, clearly not happy about losing her human friend's attention. The expression in his eyes, when he looked

back at her, was one she'd never seen before. She was surprised to feel a pulse of fear. "The stars!" he cackled, unfolding his original drawing and turning his penlight on it. "The answer was right in front of me the whole time! I was a fool not to see it!"

More puzzled than ever, Skye watched in confusion "and more than a little concern" as Sam's gaze flickered frantically between the symbols on his drawing, and the constellations they'd been talking about only moments ago. "Yes, yes" he muttered, excitedly, "It checks... and this one has to be Altair...yes! WOOHOO!"

He embraced Skye once again, his eyes damp with joyful tears. "That's it, that's it! The stars! It's all stars!" He kept repeating.

\_WHAT is all stars, silly fledgling?!\_ She snapped back, whopping him with an ear flap. \_Your thoughts are such a jumble, I don't think a Master Speaker could read them!\_

The impact brought him back to his senses long enough to explain. "The symbols on that arch... They're not letters or words, they're star maps! Each one represents a different constellation, visible in this part of the world during this time of year!"

His gaze flicked back and forth a few more times, then he frowned. "There's still one I'm not sure of... these three circles arranged in a column, each one larger than the one before it... but, Sweet Saint Blaise's Bloomers, it \_can't\_ be any harder than this!" He waved the paper, whooped again, then suddenly sagged. "Whoa."

Skye's head was under him in a heartbeat, lending firm support as he shakily pulled himself upright. \_Slowly, my fledgling! There will be time to figure out the rest tomorrow. You are hungry, as am I, and it is time to rest.\_ She started towards the house, leaving him no choice but to walk along if he wanted her support. "But" he started to protest.

\_Inside!\_ She sent, reinforcing the command with a firm nudge. \_Share what you have learned with the others. Whatever secret of the Builders you have managed to uncover has been hidden for a very long time, and it will still be there for you to find TOMORROW!\_

Sam had no choice but to go along with the push. Hiccup and Stoick looked up as he came in, Skye right behind. "You look happy" Hiccup said. "What's up?"

## 9. Chapter 9

\_Welcome back, fellow dragon-followers, for the next chapter! Yes, it was pretty obvious where I'd gotten the inspiration for the portal's design. The main difference between it and the Stargate is this particular construct is fixed - no inner ring to rotate and a lot fewer glyphs. As to how, exactly, it operates... read on!

><em>

\_The only 'spoiler' I'll give is it's time to bring Sam home, though not without a few bumps and bruises as it were. As one might expect, you can't make any trip into the past without having **\*\*something\*\*** change... well, 'some things' in this case. Thanks for reading

and following!\_

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 9\*\***

"\_An idea is something that won't work unless you do."\_ (Thomas Edison)

The eastern horizon was getting lighter by the moment, though the western still held a generous assortment of stars. A gust of wind, cool but not chill, disturbed the otherwise-still air, creating tiny whirlwinds in the dust and sand on the plateau's surface, carrying the scent of salt and seaweed with it.

Sam glanced at his watch for what felt like the hundredth time, then drew his Glock from its holster and set it for CW laser mode. A quick burst of vibration from the grip told him the weapon's processor had recognized his palm print and was ready to fire.

"You're really sure you want to try this?" said Hiccup, from where he stood with Toothless to Sam's right. "You showed me what that lightning-thrower of yours can do; how do you know it won't do the same to the arch?"

\_A good point\_ Skye added, from Sam's left, eyeing her companion as though she were uncertain of his sanity. \_No one knows how the Builders opened these Doors. It seems... unwise... to simply strike it with lightning. It may strike back!\_

Sam sighed, and explained once again. "As near as I can tell, whatever this arch is, it collects solar and heat energy. Absorbs fire and lightning" he added, seeing the look of confusion on Hiccup's face at the unfamiliar terms. "It doesn't seem to have any way to 'strike back,' according to my studies."

He shrugged, and looked from one dragon to the other. "If you two are really worried about this, then get clear and I'll try with just my gu... uhh, 'lightning-thrower.' You'll know quickly enough â€" hell, so will I â€" if things go sour. Besides, that bit of odd poetry says, right up front, 'When Dark embraces Light, as the Three dance as One, the Traveler may offer Fire.' That's all I plan to do â€" offer my own form of 'fire,' and see what happens.

"The only problem is, I don't know if my kind of fire will work. Since dragons seem to have some sort of connection with these 'Builders,' the words might mean 'dragon fire.'" His gaze settled fully on Skye. She stared back without the slightest flinch. "This is the only thing I've come across so far which holds a clue to how I got here, and it may hold the way home as well. You said you wanted to help me..."

She looked away for a moment, then turned back, her expression resigned and fierce all at once. \_I can see you are committed to this wind-twist no matter what. Beware! If you manage to kill yourself, I swear by the Bright Lady I will follow you into the Silent Winds, bring you back and kill you all over again!\_

Sam produced a sound somewhere between a pained cough and a chuckle. "I'll consider myself warned" he said, then turned to the other two.



"I appreciate you coming along, but this isn't your challenge. Are you sure you want to be around when I try to activate that thing?" He nodded at the archway.

Toothless snorted, then paced over to Skye and twined his tail around hers. `_**She is my mate, as I am hers**_` he sent, firmly. `_**The risks in this life are ours to face, together.**_`

Hiccup shrugged, and added "Where Toothless goes, I go."

The eastern sky brightened further, especially at one specific point. Sam nodded, then turned to face the archway and raised his gun, putting the sighting beam squarely in the middle of the top glyph. "On my signal, then. And... thanks. No matter what happens."

The first rays of the morning sun struck the arch, turning it the color of molten metal in the forge. "Now!" Sam shouted, as he squeezed the trigger. The Glock whined and, on the spot where the sighting beam was centered, a spot of eye-searing green light flickered before vanishing into the arch's surface as though soaked up by a sponge.

The two Night Furies spat balls of their hottest flame. They impacted squarely on either leg of the archway where it met the plateau. Sam, Hiccup, and both dragons braced themselves for the shock wave from the inevitable backblastâ€

â€"which never came. Just as Sam's laser shot was being absorbed in full (something he'd never seen any other surface do without getting a nine-millimeter hole bored through it), the fireballs clung briefly to the arch's surface, flared brightly for a moment, then shrank in on themselves and vanished leaving nothing but smoke in their wake.

The reaction from the archway, though, brought a gasp from Sam. Just before the Glock chirped a warning and shut down its beam, the air inside the perimeter of the arch went hazy with blue-grey mist. A few random electrical discharges snapped weakly into the gap, then fizzled out with pops no louder than an old-fashioned cap gun.

The hazy effect died away. The arch, which bore not the slightest sign of being hit by a high-power laser and two plasma fireballs, presented nothing more than its usual vista of the cliff face.

Sam closed his eyes and holstered his pistol. Silence reigned for nearly half a minute before he turned and strode towards Skye. "Get me out of here" he said, in a fierce whisper.

Twelve minutes later, they were back in Berk. Sam quickly stripped the saddle and flight harness from Skye, gathered the gear under one arm, and strode away towards his ship without a single word.

Skye started to follow, then froze as Toothless stepped into her path. A silent exchange passed between them, then Skye nodded and leaped into flight again, heading in the general direction of Raven Point.

Hiccup looked as though he couldn't decide which way to go. Toothless settled the matter by giving him a firm nudge. `_**You can take off the saddle and false-fin now.**_`

The teen did so, almost as mechanically as Sam had, casting frequent glances in the vet's direction. His upper torso had disappeared into one of the many compartments his flying ship had, only his legs visible as he manipulated some unknown part of the machine. **\_\*\*This is something he must fly through alone\*\*\_** Toothless added, after Hiccup had stowed the flight gear. The dragon urged his human companion towards Mead Hall. **\_\*\*Come. We both need breakfast.\*\*\_**

As often happened when Sam became absorbed in something technical, no matter if it was veterinary medicine or keeping his aging ship in top condition, he lost all track of time. His disappointment warred with something he hadn't expected: An odd sense of relief.

**\_I did my level best to find a way home, and couldn't\_** he thought, as he went through the inside of the port turbine housing with a small vacuum cleaner. It was a good idea to do so at least once a week. Although the superconductive motors which drove the blades were well sealed, and the shafts supported by frictionless magnetic bearings, one could never tell when a rock or some other hard matter might get in past the baffles and cause hidden damage.

This thought, and half a thousand others, circulated through his mind as he gave both turbines a thorough cleaning and started inspecting the TQ coils for fatigue. **\_I've done my duty to UNEC, and now it's time to think long-term\_** he mused, tightening the connection on a power coupling and checking the hydrogen level in the fuel cells. **\_It could have been a lot worse... I could have been stranded alone, in the middle of nowhere. Instead, I've got friends, food, shelter... everything I need to survive. I just have to be damn careful not to do anything which might disrupt the future...\_**

The last thought stopped him cold, and he hissed in frustration. **\_And how in Saint Blaise's Blessed Blivets can I \_ever\_ be sure I haven't wrecked something?! It's enough to drive a man batty!\_**

The reference to the flying mammals brought a sudden image of Skye, rising from an oversized coffin, outfitted neatly in a Dracula-style cape complete with collar and bow-tie, her mind-speech coming across in the cheesiest imaginable horror-movie vampire accent. **\_Vere is my vish? I vant itz blood...\_**

The image started a fit of laughter, distracting him enough so he had to lay down his tools and let it pass. As he reached for the spanner and multitester once again, a sudden scrabbling on the outer hull made him jump.

Unfortunately, the engine housings of UNEC VetMed aircars are not built with sudden movements in mind. Sam's laughter died abruptly, replaced by some potent Celtic curses, as his head discovered the TQ field regulator housing.

Still muttering, he extracted himself from the compartment and looked around. Right on cue, two familiar draconic heads, one green and one blue, popped up over the cockpit rim and chirped cheerful greetings at him. "You two!" he said, shaking his head and reaching out to give them both a good scratching. They were both damp with seawater, their bellies bulging, so it wasn't hard for Sam to guess they'd just come from fishing. "So what is it about my ship you find so attractive, hmm?"

He hadn't really been expecting an answer. Then again, he hadn't expected to discover he could 'hear' dragons, either. As it was, his jaw dropped as he got two words, followed by a matching rush of emotion, one from each Terror. \_Nest!\_ the green female piped up. \_Sleep!\_ the blue added, his mind-speech carrying a distinctive male overtone.

Before Sam could so much as blink, the two had dropped back down to the rear seat, curled up against each other, and drifted off to whatever served dragons as dreamland. He chuckled, the last of the morning's frustrations fading, as he watched the pair. "Can't keep calling you two 'Hey' or 'You'" he mused. "You need names."

He thought about this as he watched them breathe, their tails or legs twitching every so often. There had been plenty of opportunities to observe all the dragons, this pair included, and it was clear their personalities were as individual and varied as any human. His mind flashed back to a few days prior, when he'd seen the male body-surfing as enthusiastically as any dolphin, and memories of a long-past vacation in the Hawaiian Islands suddenly supplied a single word: "Nalu" Sam said, nodding. "Means 'surf' or 'wave.'"

The female was harder. Sam had always gotten the impression she was as fussy and proper as a queen, but the Norse translation for 'Queen' or 'Leader' just didn't sound right. Suddenly, he remembered how the green had awakened her boyfriend the first time he'd seen them together. "Niho" he said, softly, eyeing the sleek green form. "Means 'teeth.' Nalu and Niho... yep! Perfect!"

"What's perfect?" came a familiar female voice from below. Sam turned to see Ingrid gazing up at him. "You certainly seem more relaxed than when you returned this morning."

Sam grinned back, closed the engine housing and dropped down the boarding ladder. He explained about the names he'd come up with for the pair, names which Ingrid, after a few tries, managed to pronounce without any problem. She nodded. "Very different from Norse, but it was your responsibility to name them, since they've so obviously chosen you as their human Companion." She smiled. "Perhaps you can show me these islands you speak of some time."

He started to object, then stopped. He had time, now. Nothing but. \_I should leave a 'time capsule' somewhere it'll be found\_ he thought. \_Vacuum container with a full report on what happened, logs and holos included... at least it'll give my family some closure.\_

"Perhaps I can" he said, smoothly, accepting the water-skin she held out. One long swallow later, he glanced at his watch. "Wow! I've been working for over four hours!?"

Ingrid nodded. "You needed the time. Have you decided?"

Sam didn't need his newly-developed mental abilities to know what she meant. He took a deep breath before replying. "Yes" he said, firmly. "It's obvious to me getting home is simply not possible until â€" and if â€" I figure out the entire puzzle of that gateway" he said. "Until then, there's no point in worrying. I'm here, now, in this time and place, and I will do what I can to give a good accounting of myself."

The healer flashed a brilliant smile. "You see? You really can learn!"

He returned her smile. \_She really is quite the looker\_ he mused, as he offered his arm. "Would you join me for lunch, my lady?"

She was quick to accept, and they started walking arm-in-arm towards Mead Hall. The day had taken on a whole different quality, somehow. The air seemed fresher, the sounds of village life cheerful and hearty, the sunlight starting to dim slightly, providing some relief from the glare on the ocean...

\_Dim slightly?\_

Puzzled, Sam slowed and looked towards the sun. Sure enough, a tiny sliver of shadow was starting to creep across its lower edge. \_Hmm... must be a solar eclipse.\_

He was jerked to a halt as Ingrid stopped in her tracks, her gaze following the same line his had. Her expression turned deadly serious as, from near the docks, an eerie chorus of howls arose. The chorus spread quickly, until Vikings all around them were baying like wolves. He glanced at Ingrid, his entire face a bearded question mark.

She pointed upward. "Skoll, the sky-wolf, comes to catch the sun" she said. "If we do not make enough noise to distract him, he will devour it, and we will be forever in darkness!"

He gaped at her for a moment, then chuckled. "Ingrid, no... It's a natural occurrence. Every so often, the moon moves in front of the sun for a few minutes. It's called an 'eclipse,' and they've been happening since before humans ever walked the earth. There's no 'sky-wolf' or any other kind of wolf up there."

Her gaze was iron-hard. "You have your beliefs, Sam Shay, and we have ours. Do not disrespect them!" She tilted her head back and joined the howling. "Ingrid!" Sam said, raising his voice. "Come on! It's a natural thing! They happen in my time, too. In fact, one happened the day I ended up here!"

Sam froze, his memory suddenly clear for the first time since he'd come to Berk, and his mind putting together all the pieces in a moment of crystal clarity.

The stocky pirate who had fired a plasma bolt.

The eclipse going total just as the bolt had flown past his ship.

A blue-gray vortex swallowing him and his ship.

\_And a loud cracking sound he hadn't even registered at first, a mere second after the plasma bolt had streaked past.\_

"Saint Blaise Above!" Sam yelled. \_"THAT'S IT!"\_

Before Ingrid could protest, he wrenched his arm free and ran back up the hill to his ship. He made it up the ladder in two enormous leaps, and threw the master switch for the onboard systems. "Computer!" he

gasped out, trying to catch his breath. "Arc... archive search. List total sol... solar eclipses for year AD eight-forty!"

The pause was less than five seconds. It felt to Sam like five hours. \_"One total solar eclipse found for the time specified. Date of occurrence, May fifth. Time of totality, twelve fifty-seven and six seconds, GMT. Duration of totality, five minutes, zero seconds."\_

He gasped, then added "Computer, current GMT and date, based on modified programming?"

"\_Twelve-forty and ten seconds, May fifth, eight-forty AD."\_

"Thought so!" He hissed, as he jumped from the top rung of the ladder and hit the ground in a clumsy roll. Scrambling back to his feet, he went charging into the house and started gathering his supplies and bedroll.

Just as he got everything bagged, or at least tied up enough to travel, a black streak banged through the door, opaline eyes flashing. \_What is going on?! \_Skye sent, as he leaped right over her and headed out the door. \_Sam! Wait! \_She continued, turning in place and charging out after him. \_What is wrong? Tell me! I felt your excitement all the way out at the hollow!\_

He crammed the armload into the rear cargo compartment and shoved at the door. It resisted for a moment, then clicked shut as he slammed his shoulder against it with a grunt.

"It's the eclipse!" he yelled, as he dashed around the front of the craft and vaulted up the ladder once again. "That's the missing piece! That's what those three circles, one above the other, meant! Sun, Moon, Earth, all lined up! 'When The Three Dance As One!' \_That doorway will only open\_ \_during a total eclipse of the sun!"\_

He dropped into the pilot's seat and secured his harness. His hands raced across the panel, bringing the engines to life

\_STOP!\_

The mental shout froze him in place. He blinked at the sight of Skye, clinging to the forward section of the cockpit, her eyes holding his as one of her forepaws pressed him firmly into his seat. Three more words came into his mind, each one carrying far more meaning than any dictionary could possibly lend them: \_Are... you... sure?\_

Every sound, from the still-howling Vikings to the aircar's engines to the bleeps and pings of instruments coming online, faded away. Sam gulped, his whole world narrowed to one set of opal-flecked eyes staring into his, hoping, wanting, \_needing\_ him to stay, yet willing to let him go, but it had to be \_his choice alone...\_

He reached up suddenly, arms going around her neck, his eyes blurring with tears. She reached down a wing to caress his cheek. \_I thought so\_ she sent. \_Go well and fly free, Sam Shay! As you promised to remember me, and tell others, I can do no less for my hatchlings. All will know of you, no matter what the future may bring!\_

With that, she pulled away, gently but firmly, and leaped down as

gracefully as a winged black leopard. "Tell the others?" he called, his mind and voice working as one as he secured his helmet. "Let them know... I'm sorry I couldn't stay...?"

She let loose a full-throated roar, the first Sam had heard from her since they'd met. \_I will! \_She sent, with the impression of a skyward shove. \_Now GO!\_

Turbines whined as Sam opened the throttles. The last thing he saw, before the canopy closed, was Skye leaping into the air and performing the most amazing rolling loop he'd ever seen. Quickly, he snapped on the exterior cameras, hoping he'd caught at least a part of it.

Then, before he had a chance to think about it, he turned his ship's nose due south and pushed the engines to full thrust. Acceleration slammed him back against his seat as the craft thundered across the darkening sky.

Skye leveled out and drifted back towards the ground, saddened but pleased. \_No matter what happens, I think his path will never be dull\_.

Suddenly, her thoughts were filled with memories of the morning's experiments and the results (or lack thereof) the portal had produced without one specific influence...

The connection hit her so fast and hard, she nearly stalled. She folded her wings and dove for the ground, turning her forward momentum into a full gallop and charging into the outdoor shelter where Toothless slept during warm weather. She grabbed his saddle and tail-rig in her mouth and whipped around, scattering leaves and dust in her wake as she charged down the hill towards Hiccup and Toothless.

\_GET READY TO FLY!\_ She shouted at the top of her mental voice, adding a full-throated audible roar for emphasis. Hiccup broke off in mid-howl, startled as much by the sound as by the non-verbal command echoing in his head. Skye skidded to a halt, and fairly flung the gear at the teen's feet. \_Move your tails, both of you!\_

Hiccup blinked. "But Skoll... the Darkening... we need all the noise we canOWW!" He glared at the female Night Fury, stunned by the sudden slap of her ear-flap. "What was that for?!"

Neither he nor Toothless was expecting what came next. Skye reared up on her hind legs, planted both forepaws firmly on Hiccup's shoulders, and spun him around to the south. \_He is leaving and he needs our help!\_

Hiccup's jaw dropped at the sight of the aircar, visible now as a rapidly-moving speck, the bright flashes of its anticollision lights like shooting stars against the darkening sky. "Leaving as in..."

\_\*\*Using the Doorway\*\*\_ Toothless confirmed, picking up the saddle in his jaws and shoving it at his friend. \_\*\*Trust me when I say there is no sky-wolf, and the sun will reappear no matter how noisy or silent the village gets. My mate is right â€" We must fly NOW!\*\*\_

The one thing Hiccup had in abundance, where dragons were concerned, was trust. His hands moved in a blur as he secured the flight gear and leaped into his normal position. Although, as the dragons lifted off and made top speed south, he couldn't help but wince at the sense of disapproving eyes aimed in his direction. "One change at a time" he muttered, slitting his eyes against the wind as Toothless picked up speed. "One change at a time..."

\* \* \*

><p>It took Sam four minutes flat to make it to the tiny island. He throttled back and circled, looking for any sign the gate might have gone active: Nothing. "Fine" he muttered. "'The Traveler May Offer Fire,' I'll offer as much as the ABL can generate!"<p>

He backed his ship off to five hundred meters, lined it up so its nose was pointing squarely at the center of the archway, and set the autopilot for position hold. One hand danced over the weapons console, bringing up the craft's laser. It took no more than a glance through his helmet's visor to align the target bug on the top center of the arch, and lock it in place. He glanced at the clock display: 12:50:06.

He nodded to himself, then spoke. "Computer, set laser for timed firing. At twelve-fifty-seven and six seconds, fire a ten-second burst, full power, then release laser to manual."

The machine repeated the instructions back and finished with \_"Confirm?"\_

"Confirmed."

Two beeps sounded in his earphones, followed by \_"Timed weapon sequence engaged. Six minutes, ten seconds to firing."\_

Sam put the time to good use. The memory of what had happened to his instruments when he first passed through the portal drove him to do a mass download of his ship's entire log memory to a jump-drive. This, along with memory cards from his holocam, went into a shielded vacuum container secured under his seat. He swore as one card slipped out of his hands to vanish under his seat, then shrugged it off. \_Screw it, I've got more than enough already. \_\_Dash is going to have kittens when he sees this stuff\_ he mused, with a wicked grin. \_No more rubber T-rex's in the squad room after this trip!\_

The computer dinged at him as he secured the container's holding clips.\_"One minute to firing. All systems nominal."\_

An odd sense of Deja Vu gripped Sam as he sat back up, one hand now on the throttle and the other on the joystick. He shook it off, concentrating on the portal, but Doubt wasn't done with him. \_You're not committed yet\_ a tiny part of his mind said, suddenly. \_You can turn around now, go back to Berk, and live a perfectly happy life with Skye and your other friends.\_

The sky grew darker still, shadows doubling up and losing sharpness as the eclipse progressed, and Sam suppressed another shudder. From what he had been able to recover of the original flight recorder data, the violent bucking his ship had experienced on its first

passage was a result of conflicting wind-currents around the perimeter of the portal. Entering at a high enough speed to keep those currents from grabbing on was the only way to avoid losing control.

The bad news was, if the portal didn't open, there wouldn't be enough time for him to pull up and avoid the cliff face, though he was fairly certain he could eject in time. If he was wrong...

"\_Thirty seconds to firing."\_

He flinched and looked up at the sky. Stars were appearing, and the positions of the constellations served only to reinforce his theories about the would-be gate: \_Every group in those glyphs is visible, Dark and Light are certainly dancing as one, and this 'Traveler' is more than ready to offer Fire. It \_has \_to work!\_

"\_Ten seconds" \_the computer said. \_"Nine... eight... seven..."\_

Sam's lips moved in a whispered prayer.

"\_Two... one..."\_

There was no shrieking hum, no sharp crack or solid rope of intense light, as had entranced science-fiction movie makers since the idea of "ray guns" had first cropped up. The only sound in the aircar's cabin was a sharp \_tick, \_followed by a spot of intense green blossoming on the portal's surface, just as the sky turned midnight black.

The green spot, too bright to look at with unshielded eyes, suddenly spread out. Moments later, the archway's entire surface glowed the same color, a cloud of blue-gray mist swirling into being in its center. The mist expanded quickly, filling the entire opening seconds before the laser shut down.

Sam's eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. "Saint Blaise be praised!" he gasped. In one smooth motion, he disengaged the autopilot and shoved the 'Thrust' throttle full forward. The turbines roared, sending his ship tearing through the sky and pressing him firmly into his seat.

The archway's flickering mists grew larger by the second. "\_Approaching commit point" \_the computer said. Sam's grip tightened on the controls. He knew ejecting after the commit point gave him no better than a fifty-fifty chance. Even if he survived, his ship most certainly would not.

"\_Four... Three..."\_

A loud squeak of complaint startled him, and he looked around frantically for the source. "What theâ€" \_Bloody Hell!"\_

"\_Two... One..."\_

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup's stomach was in knots as they flew on. <em>Night during day just isn't natural!<em> he thought. \_Odin Above, I hope Toothless



is right about no sky-wolf...\_

The trio had no problem at all spotting Sam's ship. It hovered perfectly still less than fifty meters below them, farther out from the island than they were, its red anticollision strobes lighting up the sky and ocean surface every few seconds. Before Hiccup could do more than wonder why Sam was just sitting there, a spark of eye-searing green winked from near the nose of the craft, followed by the same color of spot appearing at the top center of the archway.

The teen's jaw dropped and both dragons rumbled in surprise, as the archway absorbed the shot and lit up with fire the color of flawless emeralds. Seconds later, a misty vortex of blue-gray swirled to life in the middle, expanding quickly to fill the entire arch. Blue-green arcs of lightning pulsed in its depths, and the trio could feel the change in winds even from their height. Instinctively, both dragons veered to stay well clear of the tugging air currents.

A roar of displaced air, underlaid with a rising whine, diverted their attention. Sam's ship had given up its stationary position, and was now racing towards the archway at a speed Hiccup doubted even a Night Fury could match. \_\*\*Not enough salmon in the ocean to make me want to try\*\*\_ Toothless sent, wry humor in his tone.

Just then, the emerald glow dimmed and went out, taking the vortex with it. Hiccup was slammed against his safety lines as Toothless immediately went into a steep dive. Skye met him in mid-air, wingtip-to-wingtip, and it was all Hiccup could do to pull himself forward and flatten himself to his friend's back. \_\*\*Lie down, false-fin full out when I say, hold on and shut up!\*\*\_ Toothless sent in the same instant. \_\*\*This is going to be tricky...\*\*\_

The teen gulped. "What in Odin's Name are youâ€œ"

As quickly as he finished the thought, the two dragons leveled out, rocketing along barely ten meters above the ocean's surface, still in perfect side-by-side formation. Suddenly, they both spat fireballs. Each one struck precisely at the base of each leg of the archway, just as they had earlier.

This time, the archway's substance flared with fire the color of a summer sky, the vortex swirling back into being nearly twice as fast as it had before. Sam's ship was ahead of them, still accelerating. Between its wake turbulence and the conflicting pull of the vortex, Hiccup wondered if they were all about to make an early departure for Valhalla. Skye's mind-voice boomed out, in perfect sync with Toothless's, loud enough to set Hiccup's head ringing.

\_\*\*YOU'RE WELCOME!\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Bloody Hell!"<em> Sam exclaimed, as a familiar green-scaled bug-eyed face gazed reproachfully back at him. A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed it: Both Terrors were still with him, though Nalu was simply blinking sleepily, apparently wondering what all the fuss was about.

The archway's glow faded and died, taking the vortex with it.

His guts clenched as he reached for the ejection handle. \_Nothing to lose now\_ he thought. His only regret was his two stowaways were likely to die with himâ€œ"

Two brilliant blue flashes, and the gateway flared back into life, its vortex in full swirling fury. Sam's jaw dropped, and his head suddenly rang with two very familiar mental voices.

\_\*\*YOU'RE WELCOME!\*\*\_

Then a giant hand grabbed his ship, his unexpected passengers, and his consciousness, and spun them all into oblivion.

\* \* \*

><p>It was the sun's heat that woke him. It beat mercilessly through the clear plexalloy canopy of the aircar, making its occupant feel like he'd been trapped in a dry sauna. Sam groaned and tried sitting up. Every muscle he had felt as though it had been stretched out, pounded flat, then thrown back together again, and he had a headache the likes of which made his few college benders look like a Sunday-school picnic.<p>

He fumbled for the canopy release, found it, pressed it. Locks clunked, and the clear dome retracted smoothly into the rear body. The air was cool, though far from chill, and the sky clear with just a scattering of cirrus in the distance. Seagulls screamed and cormorants chattered, providing a counterpoint to the rush of waves as they curled up the rocky beach. "Computer" he croaked, pulling off his helmet. "Status report!"

After a lengthy pause, the machine started speaking. \_"Drive systems, idle and nominal, following automatic landing procedure due to incapacitation of operator. Communications, nominal. Weapons..."\_

The computer droned on, but Sam barely heard the rest of it. His mind was too busy repeating the two blissful words, "Communications, Nominal," an indication he would not have gotten if the GNSS and commsat signals had been absent.

Ignoring the headache, he tapped a key below the main display, bringing up a tactical map of the area. A rush of giddy delight swept over him as the screen promptly showed his own position â€œ" and the position and status of all the TLC-tagged birds in the immediate area.

He was home.

He let out the breath he hadn't known he was holding, and unsnapped his safety harness. Another glance outside told him he was back on the same beach where he and Gerry had grounded the pirate craft. He could still see splotches of garish yellow paint on the rocks above the high-tide line. He couldn't keep the grin off his face as he picked up his helmet, held the microphone near his lips, and keyed the transmitter. "Alladale Base, Ranger nineteen."

The response came almost immediately, sounding more than a bit surprised. "Unit calling Alladale, say call sign again?!" Sam didn't

recognize the voice, but he didn't really care. Essence only knew what changes there had been in his absence.

He keyed his mic again. "Alladale, Ranger nineteen reporting back in. Clearing from the Shetlands, enroute Alladale in the next five minutes."

The response took longer this time, and Sam wasn't surprised when the next voice over the air was Lieutenant Dashiell's. "Ranger Nineteen, Alladale. Sam, advise if you're injured?"

"Only a headache, sir" he replied. "Both myself and my ship are, otherwise, nominal."

Another pause, then: "Sam... listen to me very carefully. Do not attempt to lift off, or leave your current position! We have your GNSS fix, and a Double-R team is enroute. We will come to you. Stay put! Is this understood?"

He blinked. Rescue-and-Recovery enroute? "With due respect, sir" he replied, slowly and carefully, "I say again: My ship is functional, and I am not in any way incapacitated. I see no reason to waste Double-R resources. In light of these facts, sir, do you still wish me to remain where I am?"

The response was as immediate as it was curt. "Stay put, Ranger Shay! That is a direct order. Acknowledge!"

Sam would have argued further, except he knew Dash rarely used the words 'direct order.' When he did, though, he meant it. "Acknowledged, sir" he said, in his best officer's tone. "Ranger nineteen, holding position, awaiting Double-R pickup."

He put the helmet down, then turned around so he could check on his unexpected passengers. "Well, you two" he said. "Looks like we're getting the royal treatmentâ€œ"Oh, damn!"

Niho, the green Terror, was collapsed on her side on the rear seat, Nalu eyeing her worriedly. Her eyes were glazed with pain, and her left wing hung at an awkward angle. Sam didn't need his veterinary degree to know at least one of her wing ribs was fractured. The blue seemed all right, though there was a mottled spot on his chest which Sam took for a bruise. Soulful gold eyes locked with Sam's, and a single word popped into his head: Help?

Instinct took over. He vaulted out of the cockpit, down the boarding ladder, and popped open the cargo compartment holding his diagnostic Gauntlet and field kit. A few minutes later, he had the break (a clean one, fortunately) straightened and immobilized in a gel-splint, and fluids and pain meds administered. He smiled as Niho blinked at him sleepily, and gently scratched her neck.

"You'll be just fine in a few weeks, little one" he said, reassuringly, then sighed. "Though I'm going to have a devil of a time explaining you and your boyfriend to my boss."

Her soft purring was the only response as she drifted into drugged sleep. Nalu, who had watched the whole procedure from Sam's shoulder, seemed relieved as well, though he flinched and chirped a protest as Sam reached up to scratch him and accidentally hit the bruise.

"Sorry!" he said, eyeing the spot. "Laser therapy'll take care of that..."

Further thoughts were interrupted by the hum and roar of a UNEC rescue barge touching down on the beach. Sam stood up and waved at the nearest rescue tech, gaudy in their reflector-striped jumpsuit. "I have a patient!" he yelled. "Get me a type-four carrier!"

The next hour or so was a flurry of questions, answers, and sometimes-confusing orders. Sam insisted on transporting Niho personally, with Nalu still clinging firmly to his shoulder (much to the consternation of all present) to the base's animal infirmary. As he settled into one of the jump-seats in the rescue craft, Niho's carrier secured in the spot next to him, his mind finally had time to relax and start sorting out impressions.

There had been, he realized, some decidedly odd things about the rescue. Although everyone who saw the dragons was clearly astonished, and more than a little curious, no one asked any questions about them, specifically. His ship, rather than being checked and flown back to base separately, as was standard procedure if the craft in question were still airworthy, was promptly loaded into the barge and sealed. At one point, as he was boarding the heavy carrier, he overheard its captain muttering something about 'Code Delta' to his comm officer.

Sam had never heard the term before. When he had asked what it meant, he had received a blank look. "You must have been mistaken, sir" the captain said. "There is no such code in UNEC. You do look very tired, though. Why don't you try to rest, and we'll have you and your... friends... back at base very shortly."

Sam was, in fact, too tired to argue about it. He chalked it up to his mental state, and settled back in his seat. \_At least nothing major seems to have changed\_ he thought. \_I'll reserve judgment until I see more, though, and check a newscast or three.\_

The drone of the heavy TQ drive, coupled with the whine of the quad turbines, made an excellent hypnotic. He drifted off, Nalu's mental voice whispering \_Rest. I guard!\_

Guard he did, though it seemed like mere minutes passed before Sam was startled awake by the absence of engine noise, the presence of multiple claws gripping his shoulder and side, almost tightly enough to punch through the tough fabric of his jumpsuit, and a menacing growl he had never heard Nalu make before. A sudden sizzle, like water hitting red-hot metal, coupled with startled shouts and the cough of a fire extinguisher, brought him fully conscious.

He gaped at the scene. One of the rescue techs had, apparently, tried to take Niho's carrier. Nalu, judging by the scorched spot on the far bulkhead and the fear in the tech's expression, had taken exception to the idea.

The rescue tech, a young blonde-haired lady who couldn't have been more than a year out of the Academy, looked nervously at Sam. Two other techs hovered behind her in the corridor, one carrying a CO2 extinguisher. "Sir!" She gasped, with obvious relief. "We tried not to wake you, but the Terror... I mean, your... the..." She trailed off, gesturing at Nalu.

Sam stretched, suppressed a yawn, and smiled as he stood and picked up the carrier. Nalu's growls faded, though he continued to keep a wary eye on all present. "As you were, people" he said, trying his best to project an air of easy confidence. "You just scared him a bit. Make a hole, please?"

The passageway cleared as if by magic. Sam sauntered out, trying hard to keep from wincing as Nalu's claws continued to grip, and headed for the main hatchway. "Easy, youngster" he said, softly, reaching up to scratch the Terror's neck while being careful to avoid the bruise. "Nalu, relax! No one's going to hurt you or Niho."

The blue rumbled uncertainly but, much to Sam's relief, eased his grip. \_Bad people!\_ he sent.

"No, not 'bad'" Sam replied absently, checking on Niho through the carrier's door. She was still oblivious to the world, but her breathing was strong and steady. "They just don't know you yet. Once you spend some more time here, you might like them."

Sam wasn't certain how much raw brainpower a Terrible Terror had, but Nalu's snort spoke volumes.

He got another surprise as he reached the main hatchway. The rescue barge had already been brought into the main hangar, and barriers had been set up along the entire length of the entry ramp and across the hangar floor, forming an impromptu tunnel. He peeked out through the gap between two of the screens, and saw his aircar being swarmed over by a half-dozen technicians. Outside of them the entire hangar, normally a beehive of activity, was eerily quiet.

"This way, sir" said a deep voice behind him, as Nalu let loose a warning growl. He turned to see the rescue ship's captain, gesturing him towards the stairs. "They're waiting for you and your... patient... in the infirmary, Treatment Six." He eyed the upset Terror calmly and, after a moment, Nalu stopped growling and relaxed with a nervous chirp. The captain smiled. "You'd best hurry, sir. Lieutenant Dashiell wants you in his office as soon as you're done."

Sam gave him a long, searching look before turning to go. "Thank you" he said, simply, before descending the boarding stairs and walking quickly across the hangar floor. \_What in blazes is going on? Six is equipped for full quarantine! If they were that worried about contamination, everyone would be in Type One HazMat suits.\_

His tension eased slightly as he remembered an additional detail. Treatment Six also held the most advanced of Alladale's diagnostic and analytical equipment. \_Makes sense for a previously-unknown species\_ he mused. \_They'll likely have already downloaded the logs from my ship and the PortaLab, but field equipment can't match the base's resources.\_

He kept these thoughts foremost in his mind as he walked, using them as a shield against a bizarre feeling of unease. Just as the hangar had been eerily silent, so was the corridor outside the treatment rooms. Nalu twittered nervously, picking up on Sam's mood.

Finally, he reached the double door for Treatment Six, pushed throughâ€

and stopped cold at the sight of a tall, slender, familiar red-haired female figure, clad in UNEC veterinary whites. His jaw dropped. "Ing... Ingrid?!" he gasped.

She frowned slightly. "No, I'm Doctor Ericsson" Kate, to my colleagues." The frown switched back to a bright smile as she stepped forward and offered her hand. "You must be Doctor Shay. And who is this handsome fellow?" She nodded at Nalu who, much to Sam's surprise, displayed no sign of suspicion or hostility. Quite the contrary: His head was tilting back and forth, eyeing Ericsson curiously.

Sam shook hands, then said "That's me. Sorry for the slip-up. You look very much like someone I met just... well, recently" he corrected, hastily. "The blue one is Nalu, and the green lady with the fractured wing is Niho."

His confusion deepened as Ericsson chirped at Nalu. He chirped back, clearly surprised. Then, as Ericsson extended her arm, he transferred himself smoothly from Sam's shoulder to hers. "That's a good fellow" she said, scratching along his back as though she'd had dragons clinging to her all her life. "We'll fix that bruise of yours soon enough."

She turned back to Sam, gesturing to the carrier. "Let's have a look at Niho's wing, shall we?"

Sam handed over the carrier without a word, still stunned at his colleague's obvious skill with dragons. The insignia on her lab coat gave no clues: Standard UNEC issue, with the veterinarian's Caduceus and UNEC patch on each shoulder. Under the coat, he could see the pale green of scrubs, matching her pants.

"Kate, if you don't mind my asking" he said, as she reached into the carrier and deftly transferred a sleepy-eyed Niho to the exam table. "You seem... well, comfortable with dragons. Have you seen them before?"

She shrugged. "I've worked with large reptiles all my life. Doesn't matter if they can fly, or if they're endothermic. They work pretty much the same, no matter what. You seem to have discovered as much, judging from your work. I see you used a gel-splint... what did you give her for pain?"

"Zero-point-five Epibatidine-C, five milligrams, just before we were picked up" he replied. "Sorry, but I've lost track of time. I don't know how many hours it's been since"

"About two and a half" she said, examining his work. "Nice job, all around. This young lady will be flying again in a little less than a month, thanks to you."

Sam was dumbfounded. "How can you possibly know that?!" He burst out. "This is a species no one else has seen for millennia! For that matter, it's one which was, until now, thought to be a myth. You haven't even scanned the injury! What kind of doctor are you?!"

Her smile was as bright as it was genuine. "The kind who, apparently, has more confidence in their skills than you do in yours."

She scooped Niho up, and transferred her to one of the recovery cubicles in the next room. Sam didn't know whether to follow her in and demand an explanation, or just go with it.

"Relax, Sam" she said, as she came back into the treatment room and washed her hands. "You did great. Now, I know the Lieutenant's waiting for you, and I've got to start laser therapy on Nalu's bruise. Do you know if he sustained any other injuries?"

All Sam could do was shake his head. "I'll look him over anyway, just to make sure" she said. The phone picked that moment to warble, and she scooped it up in a heartbeat. "Treatment Six, Dr. Ericsson... Yes, sir, he's here. Just a moment."

She offered the handset to Sam. He accepted it, still trying to wrap his mind around this stranger of a doctor who seemed to know at least as much as he'd learned about dragons. "Ranger Shay" he said.

"Sam, are you done taking care of your patient?" Lieutenant Dashiell asked. There was a note of impatience in his voice. "If so, get yourself up here!"

His jaw worked a few times, but he couldn't seem to find any words right away. "Ah... yes... yessir!" he finally stammered. "She seems to be in good hands. I'll be right there."

He hung up, looking helplessly at Kate, clearly torn between following Dash's orders and wanting to observe. "Scram!" Kate said, pushing him towards the door with a chuckle. "I'll call if I need you." Nalu reinforced this with a contented chirp. \_Go now, find later!\_ he sent.

Sam went. Two minutes later, he was standing in front of Dash's desk. One other man was present, dark-skinned and clean shaven, but with a pair of the bushiest jet-black eyebrows he'd ever seen. They provided a startling contrast to the golden amber color of the man's eyes. Though he was clearly a civilian, judging by the coat and tie, he bore a silent air of authority which commanded instant respect. The vet thought he looked familiar, but he couldn't recall why.

"I'm sure you know the Secretary-General, Subrata Gupta" Dashiell said. Sam's eyes widened slightly, but he managed a smooth bow. "Mr. Secretary, this is an unexpected honor."

Gupta inclined his head. "The honor is mine, Ranger Shay" he said, in the familiar clipped tenor Sam now remembered from past speeches. Gupta had been blessed by the kind of voice a person could listen to for hours without tiring of it; a considerable asset for the leader of a league of nations. "No doubt, you have many questions." He smiled, his teeth brilliant white and perfectly aligned.

Sam nodded slightly. "That... would be quite an understatement, sir."

Gupta nodded. "And, no doubt, there is much you have to tell us." He waved towards the other chair.

"Please, Ranger Shay, be seated and at ease. Tell us all you have experienced since you and your ship went missing last month. In your

own words, please, and leave nothing out." He smiled again, and lifted his arms. "Pretend I am nothing more than an old friend of your family, one who has been concerned about what has happened to you. I, in my turn, will explain all I can of what has happened in your absence."

Once again, Sam found himself at a momentary loss for words. Treat the Secretary-General of the UN as if he were speaking to an old friend?! He looked over at Dashiell, who simply nodded and silently mouthed 'do it.'

So he did. It got easier as time progressed. He quickly found Gupta to be as outstanding a listener as he was a speaker, encouraging Sam to go on over the rough spots and, oddly enough for a semi-official report, seeking his opinions and speculations as well as the facts. The only thing he left out was his experiences with mindspeech.

Once again, he found himself losing all track of time. There were two meal breaks during the session, but no one else disturbed them.

"...and I came straight from the clinic to this office, sir. You know the rest." Sam said, stretching. Curious, he glanced at the wall clock "€" and gasped. It had been just past noon when he'd returned to Alladale; it was now 19:45. Fatigue washed over him in a rush, and the room seemed to tilt slightly. "Whoa..."

Gupta eyed him with concern, then turned to Dashiell. "Robert, I think we have everything we could ask for, yes?"

"Absolutely, Mr. Secretary" Dashiell replied. "It's all recorded in any case." He seemed much more relaxed than when they'd started. "Sam, you look like you're about ready to drop, and after what you've been through, I'm not surprised." He pushed a button on his phone. Moments later, the door opened to reveal one of the on-site dormitory staff. "Hawkins, see Ranger Shay to the infirmary for a checkup, then to his usual quarters."

The orderly nodded. "Certainly, sir. Ranger Shay, if you're ready?"

Sam stood up, still shaky, but able to navigate. "Sir... Mr. Secretary... that's it? You believe me?"

Dashiell eyed him. "Is there a reason we should not?" Gupta asked, curiously.

Sam's mind was going in circles. Dully, he shook his head. "Ah... no, sir. It was all the truth, as I remember it."

Dashiell nodded. "Very good, Sam. You're in no shape to continue, and I can hardly blame you. We'll pick this up tomorrow. One thing: You are not to discuss these events with anyone outside this room without express approval from myself or the Secretary. Is that clear?"

Sam had to smile at this. "Very clear, sir. I doubt anyone else would believe me in any case." He saluted, and wobbled out, following the orderly.

After the door had shut, both Dashiell and Gupta collapsed back into



their chairs. "Sir, if Sam didn't have a reputation for complete honesty..."

The Secretary nodded. "I know, Robert, I know. You would throw him to the head-shrinkers and be done with it." He sighed, gustily, interlacing his fingers. "It is just so amazing! It is a shame we cannot risk reproducing such... experiences. Time travel, accidental or not, is far too dangerous.

"Just as one example, we have no way of knowing what, if anything, his visit to the past has changed in the present because we would have no memory of anything being different. Sam is the only one who would know, and that is why we must proceed as planned. His story, combined with the artifact we found, only confirms the necessity!"

Dashiell winced, clearly disturbed. "I know, but I don't have to like it! Strange as they are, those little dragons... what are they called? Horrors? They're anything but. In fact, they're endearing little cusses. I hate the thought of just ripping them away from Sam, especially since they seem to like him."

Gupta smiled. "'Terrors,' according to my contacts. Either 'Table Terrors' or 'Terrible Terrors,' as the beholder chooses. Both names are accepted. They will be in transit to the reservation before Sam wakes, and he will not remember them any more than he will remember anything else which has happened to him for the past month."

"You're sure this drug won't affect his skills? What he knows about being a vet and a UNEC Ranger?"

"Not at all" Gupta assured him. "The time span and degree of memory loss can be very precisely controlled. As for this archway at the Shetlands, I have dispatched a scientific team to find a way to destroy it, or at least permanently conceal it. From Sam's description, it requires a total solar eclipse and considerable energy to activate, so we are not time-stressed. One cannot use what one cannot access, even if my team is unable to destroy it.

"My technical crew have recovered his ship's logs. The official logs have been altered appropriately, and Ranger Hoshino has been fully debriefed." He shrugged. "Traumatic, short-term amnesia is very common in such events. There will be no embarrassing questions."

Dashiell gave him a sour look. "You certainly seem to have thought this through, right up to putting your own captain and crew on the rescue barge. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were enjoying this!"

The Secretary returned his gaze calmly. "What would you have of me, Robert? Do you wish me to say I am wrong? That I am a monster for taking control of an honored Ranger's affairs in this way?"

He sighed softly. "To answer your question, no, I do not enjoy acting in this manner. However, I do what I believe I must, in the interest of UNEC and the world. If what I must do includes altering a person's memory, when the alternative is to risk mass panic and unrest, then I will do it. This is my duty as Secretary-General. I will let no one but History become my judge."

Dashiell's glare, if anything, got stronger. "Sir, I really don't like messing with people's heads, especially where Sam is concerned! We are, each and every one of us, the product of what our memories and experiences make us. To deliberately take any of it away, well, we've no clear idea what the long-term effects are, no matter how tightly controlled or 'safe' it is!

"If 'mass panic' is what you're worried about, look at what happened after SETI discovered their first artificial extraterrestrial signal, and the IMC built that huge machine from the data the signal carried. Sure, the religious orders went a little bonkers over the whole thing, especially after Dr. Arroway's story went public, but the general population took it pretty well. Why would they react any worse to dragons? The Chinese have revered them for millennia!"

Gupta eyed him with shock. "Do you truly consider a year of civil war among the religious orders 'a little bonkers?' And do I need to remind you of what happened to the first Machine, and Doctor Drumlin?"

"Do I need to remind you, sir, of the advances in our science and social structure which came after that year?" Dashiell shot back. "What happened was certainly tragic, but so was the explosion which destroyed the old 'Challenger' space shuttle. What would have happened if all the people behind that project had simply decided the risk was too great, and buried their collective heads in the sand? New Berk and its branch enclaves have been in place, hidden from the public, for centuries! Given our current state of technology, how much longer do you think they can remain hidden?"

The Secretary's expression turned thoughtful. "Let Sam keep his memories" Dashiell pleaded. "He's been fascinated by the possibility of dragons since before his first year at the Academy. Let's read him in to the program, and talk to the village's ruling council. Hell, he could be their liaison to UNEC!"

For a moment, it seemed as though Gupta might agree. Then he closed his eyes and shook his head, sadly. "It is not my decision, Robert. My orders come from the highest authority. I cannot ignore them without endangering all our civilization has achieved. I am passing those orders on to you. You must interpret and act on them in accordance with your own position and duties."

Dashiell grumbled something under his breath, then added "Let the record show, sir, that I protest. I will obey my orders, of course, but there is nothing in the regulations which says I must like any of them!"

Gupta rose, a sad smile on his well-tanned face, picked up the phone and dialed. He gave his orders, then hung up and turned back to Dashiell. "Indeed there is not, Robert, and it will be so noted. May such acts not reflect badly on our Karma."

Dashiell stalked out without another word.

\_Welcome back! I'm posting this a couple of hours early for a variety of reasons, but suffice to say the proverbial plot is about to get a lot thicker. Enjoy, thanks for following along!  
><em>

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 10\*\***

"\_Innocence does not find near so much protection as guilt."\_

\_(Francois de La Rochefoucauld )\_

\_(October 15th, 2090, UNEC Ranger Base, Alladale Highlands, Scotland, 20:20 BST)\_

Sam stepped out of the shower in his quarters, feeling orders of magnitude better. He wrapped himself in a robe, sat down at his desk, and tapped a speed-dial button on his phone. \_One last check to see how those scaly menaces to mental stability are doing...\_

It was answered on the third ring, but not by the voice he expected. "Treatment Six, Doctor Abshier" said a male tenor with just a hint of Texas twang.

Sam blinked. "Doctor Shay here. Could I speak to Doctor Ericsson, please?"

There was a pause, then: "No one by that name here, sir. Are you sure you called the right room?"

\_Must have gone off-shift\_. "I must have just missed her" he replied. "No matter. I brought in a pair of... rather unusual... patients a little after noon. I just wanted to see how they're doing."

"Unusual?" There was a longer pause. "Doctor Shay, we're pretty busy here" came the voice, unmistakably harried. "I don't mind giving you a status, but I'd appreciate it if you'd be a little more clear what you're talking about!"

Sam was puzzled, but he knew all too well what 'pretty busy' meant in reference to a veterinary clinic. "Sorry to bother you" he replied, just as someone knocked on his door. "I'll check back later."

The only response was a terse "Right" and a loud 'click.' Sam chuckled, and called out "Enter!"

In walked Lt. Dashiell, in casual civvies, carrying two glasses and a bottle of fifty year-old Scotch. Sam knew that bottle all too well. He'd gotten it from his barkeep of a brother and given it to Dashiell when he was first promoted to Lieutenant. Ignoring the fact he was still clad in nothing but a deep-blue bathrobe, Sam came to parade-ground attention and snapped off a salute (though he had trouble keeping a straight face).

Dashiell eyed him for a moment, then carefully put down the bottle and glasses on the desk and blew a juicy Bronx cheer. "You can hold that salute until you freeze, you clown!"

Sam turned the salute into a silly gesture, reminiscent of an old Mel Brooks film "Spaceballs," yes, that was it " and sat back down.

"I take it, Lieutenant Dash, sir, that this is a social call?"

For answer, Dash uncorked the bottle and poured them both a healthy shot. "You take it correctly, Ranger Sam" he said, dropping into a spare chair, drink in hand. "I don't give a flying monkey what the med-techs say, there's nothing that can't be cured by a hot shower and a cool scotch. To Honor!"

"Honor it is" Sam replied, slightly puzzled, as he matched the toast. The drink left a trail of soft flame in its wake all the way down to his stomach, flame which became a warm glow. "I thought you were saving this stuff for a special occasion" he said, eyeing the glass with appreciation.

Dash promptly refilled them both. "So traveling over a thousand years through Time itself and bringing back two living examples of a species believed mythical, isn't 'special' enough for you? Saint Blaise Above, Sam, you're getting picky in your advancing years!"

This drew a snort. "Speaking of, Dash" he said, "I just tried to reach Dr. Ericsson to find out how those two were doing. Someone else was on duty, a Dr. Abshier, and he had no idea who or what I was talking about."

"No surprise" came the quick reply. Was it Sam's imagination, or was it a little too quick? "Kate's a specialist. She was passing through, on her way to Geneva from Bergen, and I asked her to help out once we had some idea of what you were bringing in. Doc Abshier's on the swing shift, and as far as I know they've never met."

Sam took another swig of the scotch. "But even so, there's no way he or anyone else would have missed a pair of dragons in the recovery bay! I don't think even finding a live Dire wolf would top it."

Dash nodded. "All too true, but he can't miss what's not there. Kate was just leaving with the both of them as I was on my way to see you. She said to tell you they're both doing fine, and thanks for the help." He chuckled. "The blue one " Nalu? " He'd wrapped himself around her neck like an oversize scarf with scales. I pity anyone who tries to separate them."

Sam downed what was left in his glass and frowned, as his friend promptly refilled it. "Dash, I don't get it: My ship is perfectly airworthy, but I get told to stay where I am until Rescue can get there. Everybody who sees that colorful pair of winged troublemakers is plainly curious, but never one single question about them and no one's taking any pictures. Finally, my report is accepted without question, even though there's enough in there to put me in a rehab facility for the next decade.

"Now you're here, with a bottle of vintage scotch, doing your best to see we both down it like there's no tomorrow." He put down his glass, and stared hard at his commander. "Sir, to put it bluntly: What the bloody blue blazes is going on?!"\_

Dashiell was silent for nearly a minute. They knew each other well enough so Sam could tell he was struggling with something. "Tell me about the black one you met â€" Skye? Tell me more about her" he urged. The bottle was over half-empty, but Sam could hold his liquor just as well as his boss. It was clear there was something bothering Dashiell. Sam, despite his impatience, decided to keep playing along.

"She... was probably the most amazing being I've ever met" he said. "You could get lost in those eyes of hers. They were like flawless opals with an obsidian core. And the intelligence, the sheer power in them! Dash, I don't know if dragons had royalty, but if they did she was a queen among them. She had this way of commanding instant respect, but never at the expense of putting down whoever she was looking at. It was more like... you could see yourself in her eyes, as she saw you, all your strengths and weaknesses at once."

He downed half his glass, and continued. "After the initial shock, I knew, beyond any doubt, she just wanted me to achieve whatever goal was most important to me â€" getting home, in this case â€" even if it meant never seeing each other again. Knowing her was... well, inspiration. Hell, she got me over my fear of heights! Name me a human shrink who could even get close to the subject without putting me in a panic!"

Dash grinned. "Not even UNEC's best. If she managed to get you over that particular hump, she's done us all a big favor and she must have been one very special lady." He refilled both glasses, then downed his in a single toss. His expression turned serious.

"Sam, as far as believing you, it wasn't an issue. Within an hour of your ship's arrival, we had the entire set of flight recorder and onboard camera logs downloaded. Even if that wasn't enough, you shot enough holovid footage to convince any skeptic. I... can't tell you anything more. Not just yet. If you've ever trusted me before, please, trust me now!"

Sam was more than a little surprised. He'd never seen the man so deeply shaken. "If not now, when? We both know the protocols for discovery and reporting of a previously undiscovered species and none of them involve any of this cloak-and-dagger crap."

To his credit, Dash winced. "How well I know! Sam, all I can say right now is there's much more in what's happened to you than anyone, myself included, ever guessed. Again, I have to ask: Trust me. Please!"

Sam eyed him steadily for a long moment, then finished his own drink. "First thing in the morning" he said, firmly. "Oh-seven-hundred, sharp. No argument, no fancy dances. You, me, breakfast, and you fill me in on every thing!"

Dashiell got up, collected the empty bottle and glasses, and headed for the door. Just before he went out, he turned back with a look Sam hadn't seen since they were both first-year recruits: Fear.

"Remember Skye" he said. "If nothing else, focus on your memory of her!"

With that, he was gone. Sam rolled his eyes, then went to brush his teeth and shave. He'd just finished drying off when there was another knock. Puzzled, he pulled the door open to find one of the med-techs holding out a small cup with three pills in it. "What's this?" Sam asked, taking the cup and eyeing the contents.

"Doctor Weaver's orders, sir" the tech said, respectfully. "One of your test results showed some imbalances in your nervous system which might prevent you from sleeping. These will correct the imbalance, and help you rest. Everything else looks fine, so you'll be cleared for regular duty in the morning."

Sam nodded. "Thank you" he said, as he closed the door. He downed the dose with a swallow of water, then stretched out on his bed and killed the lights. His head buzzed slightly from the scotch, but he didn't feel drunk at all. He mulled over the day's events, and wondered once again why UNEC, with its reputation for transparency and fairness, would be indulging in silly spy antics with its own people.

\_Or maybe not so silly\_ he mused. \_Something sure had Dash on edge, and it's nearly unheard of for the Secretary to personally review a Ranger's report.\_

Then again, the happenings of the last month had been 'nearly unheard of' and then some. He resolved to start, after breakfast, by tracking down Kate Ericsson. \_I don't care what kind of 'specialist' she is; she's seen dragons before, and she knows more than she's telling...\_

Fatigue suddenly hit like an ocean wave. He had just enough time to turn over and pull the covers into a comfortable position before sleep claimed him.

\* \* \*

><p>A spot of emerald green swirled into being at the bottom of a whirlpool of blue-gray mist. The spot grew rapidly, filling his entire field of vision with a scene of rare beauty. Vine-draped trees, in full bloom, moved slightly in the breeze around a crystal-clear miniature lake. It was late in the day, by the angle of the sun, and the few clouds in the sapphire sky were lit with soft gold and brilliant orange. The breeze, just starting to turn cooler from the day's heat, was filled with birdsong.<p>

\_Very nice\_ Sam thought. \_Reminds me of... of where...\_

Odd. His memory was, normally, excellent. \_Ah. That's it\_ he thought\_. This is where I saw that purple heron.\_

He looked around towards the narrow end of the lake. Sure enough, a purple heron stood calmly in the shallows, one leg tucked up under its body. It regarded him with a penetrating gaze " and one of its eyes closed briefly in a sly wink.

Sam chuckled. \_And just what are you up to?\_ He thought.

The last thing he expected was an answer, but there it was, suddenly, a soft whispering in his mind: \_You'll see\_ it said. \_Listen!\_

Under any other conditions, Sam would likely have checked himself into the base infirmary if he thought herons were speaking to him. Now, it didn't feel in the least surprising. He did as the bird said, stretching his hearing as hard as he could.

The voices filtered in from behind him, faintly at first, then gaining strength. There were two; male and female, young-sounding. Teenagers, he thought, as he turned towards the source. He felt his eyes widen as he took in the pair and his point of view drifted closer. \_I know these two!\_ He thought, as he moved towards them. \_But... from where? Frell, what's wrong with my memory?!

"â€"in trouble for skipping out on the Howling?" the girl said. She was tall, pale blonde and, despite her slender build, Sam knew this one was all muscle and sinew. The boy she was with was just as slender and sported deep green eyes in a freckled face topped with reddish-brown hair. He was clad in what looked like leather breeches and a green vest.

Splashing sounds came from behind him, coupled with deep-toned grunts and snorts, but he didn't really want to turn and look just yet. Something about the conversation between these two was fascinating beyond words.

The boy shrugged. "No more than usual" he said. "It helped that my dad saw Toothless and Skye all but carry me off. He knows better than to try and argue with a pair of Night Furies, once they're set on doing something."

Sam's thoughts went into a whirl. Strange names... Toothless? He had a flash of dark, in the center of which a pair of yellow-green eyes blazed. The flash vanished as quickly as it had come.

The other name, though... Skye! \_That\_ one brought a different flash, of gray eyes flecked with rainbow sparks, like opals, and a sense of longing so sharp it hurt. And what in blazes was a 'Night Fury?' Frustration flared. Why couldn't he remember?! It was as if there were a thick wall of cobwebs hiding the answers.

He turned his attention back to the conversation, hoping for more clues. "I wish I could have seen it" the girl said, scuffing one foot on the ground. "What did it look like again?"

The boy leaned up against a rock, and tossed a couple of loose pebbles into the water. "Imagine a lightning storm" he said, "all stuffed into a tankard. Stir it like you would a mug of tea and imagine the lightning and clouds all swirling together. He went right into the center of it, Astrid. One second, he was there, the next it looks like he's getting stretched out as thin as a bone needle, over this huge distance..."

He clapped his hands together, sharply. "Then â€" nothing. The sun started to come back, and the stone ring looked as empty as it always has." He sighed. "I just hope he got to where he was going."

"\_Time to wake up, sir.\_"

He looked around, startled, unable to tell where the new voice had come from. The splashing behind him ceased, then changed to heavy

footfalls. Two slender black winged shapes ambled into his field of view, moving with a fluid grace he rarely saw. \_What in all that's holy \_are\_ those?!\_ Again, the feelings of 'familiar' and 'utterly unknown' collided.

"\_Time to wake up, sir."\_

"Not yet!" He heard himself snap, though his voice sounded oddly muffled. In that same instant, one of the dark shapes whipped around. He found himself suddenly transfixed by storm-gray eyes, flecked like opals. Just as the image began to break up, a familiar voice rang in his head: \_You will find me again\_ it said.

He sat up with a jolt, his pulse racing, his breathing quick and shallow. He glanced around in the dim light, unaware of where he was.

"\_Time to wake up, sir."\_

The voice, feminine and mechanical, was emanating from the clock on his nightstand. It read 06:01 in red flashing digits. \_"Time to waâ€"\_"\_

It cut off abruptly as his palm slammed down on the 'Acknowledge' button. For another minute or so, he sat still, waiting for his breathing and pulse to slow down. He was in his quarters at Alladale base, and there was something he'd meant to do this morning... yes! Check with Dr. Ericsson, that nice redhead, about... what? Something to do with...

It was gone. He growled in frustration, then winced as a pulse of headache made itself known. Vague memories of the infirmary flickered through his mind, coupled with visions of Dash and an old bottle containing a bright amber liquid.

\_That's it \_he thought, as he flung the covers off, got up and stretched. \_Dash and I had a bit of a bender last night, yeah. Nice of him to share out that scotch, even if it did spark weird dreams!\_

Instinct and habit took over, leading him through shaving and getting ready for the day's patrol. A glance at the weather forecast â€" partly cloudy, high temperature around 14 Celsius, moderate breeze â€" prompted him to add a light jacket to his duty gear before heading for the cafeteria.

It was crowded, as usual, with the graveyard-to-morning shift change. However, he had no problem securing lean ham, scrambled eggs, mixed fruit and strong green tea. Along the way, he found himself the recipient of considerably more greetings and wishes for good health than usual. After the fourteenth or so 'Welcome back,' he started to wonder if he was missing something.

Granted, there was a blank spot in his memory. He was having trouble recalling what, exactly, had happened yesterday. There had been the eclipse, chasing that hideously-colored smuggler's ship...

Nothing. It was as if he'd run into a mental wall. Puzzled, he settled at a corner table, picked up the newspaper â€" and felt his jaw drop as he saw the date.



"Sam! Good to see you up and around!" A tall figure in a white lab coat sat down opposite him, smiling a greeting. Dr. Ed Weaver was the base's chief medical officer. He stood a skinny six-one, clean-shaven, with a complex of laughter-lines bordering jade green eyes. His own tray held a large bowl of mixed fruit and a mug of steaming coffee. "How do you feel? Any headache? Nausea? Do you remember anything about what happened?"

Sam blinked, confused for a moment. "Ah... just a little, Doc. Headache, I mean. It's almost gone now." He gestured at the paper. "What did happen? I seem to have lost some time. Last thing I remember, Gerry and I had taken down a smuggler. He was on the ground, I was flying cover, andâ€"

The wall again. Sam shivered. "Doc, what's wrong with me? I don't remember a thing, and that's not normal!"

Weaver took a gulp of his coffee, made a face, then speared some cantaloupe on his fork. "It can be, in situations like yours. Traumatic short-term amnesia.

"According to the official report, and your onboard cameras" he continued, "one of the smugglers you and Ranger Hoshino were chasing hit you with a modified plasma rifle. Your stun charge took him down in the same instant, but the bolt hit your ship square in the nose. Pretty much fried all your avionics. It's a good thing you were just shy of landing height when you went down!"

"As it was, you caught a nasty electric shock and a concussion. You've been in a coma for two weeks, and you finally woke up yesterday." He smiled again, then clasped Sam's free hand. "You're clear for duty, but take it easy for a couple of days. And stop by the infirmary tonight, for a checkup. Open Sky!"

With that, Weaver gathered up his remaining fruit and coffee and made a beeline for the exit. Sam just gazed after him, open-mouthed, then shook off the feeling of weirdness and went back to his food. As he lifted the next fork-full towards his mouth, he froze, staring in disbelief at the white-yellow conglomeration.

His stomach lurched suddenly, prompting him to drop the fork. Egg scattered across the tray. \_What in blazes is going on now?!\_ He thought, eyeing the mass with a mix of horror and disgust. \_I can't stand eggs!\_

But the pile was visibly smaller than it had been when he'd picked up the tray. As if this weren't evidence enough of a minor gastronomic disaster, the aftertaste chose that moment to kick in with a vengeance.

Appetite gone, Sam scooped up the tray, dropped it on the cleaning belt, and made a dash for the men's room. Fortunately, the reaction wasn't strong enough to require a change of uniform though it left him somewhat shaky. "You've got a funny definition of 'clear for duty,' Doc" he muttered to himself, as he headed for the squad room.

The day's briefing was blessedly short, no more than ten minutes, then he found himself handed another surprise. "A new ship?" he said,

with a smile, eyeing the transfer papers Lt. Dashiell handed him after the others had left.

Dash nodded. "You know the plasma bolt took out the avionics on your old boat, right?" Sam nodded. "Well" Dash continued, "this is proof positive there's a bright side to everything. While I'd rather not have had you flat on your back for the last couple of weeks, it seems replacing and upgrading your ship's innards would have been more expensive, in the long run, then simply issuing you a new ship."

He grinned broadly, and offered a hand. Sam took it, still a little dazed. "Welcome back, Ranger Shay. Take an hour or so to make sure everything's where it should be, then handle whatever comes your way as usual. If you need to retrieve anything personal from your old ship, it's in the maintenance hangar, bay 15-B."

"Thank you, sir" Sam said, uncertainly, as Dashiell hurried off. It was normally the duty of the flight-support crews to transfer a ranger's tools and personal items between ships. \_Why is he telling me where the old one is?\_

Still, a new aircar was nothing to sneeze at. Sam hurried out to the main hangar, full of anticipation despite a persistent feeling of something being just slightly off.

The feeling vanished as he rounded a corner and saw his new craft. He froze in place for a moment, a soft whistle of surprise escaping his lips, then started a slow walk-around. This wasn't just a 'new ship'; this was the latest of the Phaeton-class craft! A Mark IV, to be exact. \_In short\_ Sam thought, running a hand over the curve of the nose fairing and feeling it glide over the liquid-smooth surface without leaving a mark, \_the latest and greatest off the assembly line. \_"And I thought they were still in final trials" he said to himself.

"Which were completed just last week" came a new voice from behind. He turned to see a tall, slender man in the Navy-blue jumpsuit of a UNEC aircar mechanic, bright yellow chevrons decorating the shoulders. He had a narrow face with a devil-may-care grin, topped with a neat bowl of black hair just beginning to gray around the temples, and gray-blue eyes. "She's a beauty all right" the man continued, as he stepped forward and offered a hand.

Sam returned the firm handshake. "Ranger Shay, I see? Tech Sergeant Jarod Lee, at your service. Welcome back, sir! Everyone in the group's been rooting for you, ever since we saw what happened to your other ride." A look of sadness crossed Lee's face, and he shook his head. "Worst plasma-strike I've ever seen."

Before Sam could utter a word, Lee's grin was back. "Climb aboard! I'll give you a quick run-down on the new gear."

Still somewhat dazed by the tech's mercurial mood changes, Sam climbed up the boarding ladder and dropped into the left seat. New-ship smell permeated the entire cockpit, and he gazed in admiration at the updated avionics and controls. "Same basic controls, for the most part" Lee said, climbing up and standing on the ladder. "One difference is we've improved the master-slave relationship between the thrust and lift throttlesâ€"

Sam listened with half an ear, touching controls here and there, noting a much higher percentage of touch-pads as opposed to physical switches. An odd thought tweaked his mind as Lee was saying something about water-landing capability, and the fact the thrust turbines could now operate even when flooded. "What about SONAR?" Sam asked, as the sergeant paused for a breath.

Lee grinned, leaned down, and touched a section of display screen just above Sam's right knee. The display promptly lit in a familiar pattern, though there was no return-echo indication and TEST MODE glowed in the upper right corner. "No more SONAR, sir" Lee said, in a smug tone. "Pulsed millimeter wave imaging all the way, using the new Hall-Dempsey return sensor array. About six times the resolution and accuracy of the best SONAR, and no more ear-shattering pulses to bother the local marine life!"

Sam nodded appreciatively, and touched the same spot. The display went dark. "Keep the Scauldrons happy, too" he said.

Lee blinked at him. "Keep the \_what\_ happy, sir?"

Now it was Sam's turn to look puzzled. "Scauldrons. They hate SONAR. Drives 'em nuts, and they're big enough to let you know about it! Don't be surprised if you've not seen one, though. They're found onlyâ€"

He broke off. The blank wall in his mind was back, and he growled in frustration. "Never mind" he said. "Chalk it up to the weird morning I'm having. What about weapons?"

Lee looked at him a little uncertainly, but continued with a detailed description of the ship's armament. Finally, he ran out of steam. "Any questions, sir?"

Sam shook his head, secured his safety harness and slid his new helmet into place. "Not at the moment" he said, feeling a sudden urge to be out and about, as far away into the wilderness as he could get. "Thanks for the briefing."

He started the main power-up sequence. Lee, taking the hint, flashed a smile and a salute, and slid neatly back down the ladder. Moments later, Sam had lift clearance. He eased his craft out the hangar doors and into the cloudy skies, reveling in the sensation of flight once again.

And yet, even with a craft which seemed almost to respond to his thoughts in terms of where and how to fly, he couldn't shake the feeling there was something \_missing.\_ His legs kept twitching in the oddest way, as though he were shifting his weight in order to stay balanced against his seat, even though no aircar worth its salt required such maneuvers.

Back at the main hangar, Sergeant Lee found himself equally puzzled. The Ranger had seemed quite confident about the strange word â€" 'Scauldron,' it was â€" but had brushed it off moments later.

One thing Sergeant Lee did not lack in the slightest was curiosity. It had gotten him through his A&P certification in record time, just as it had gotten him in trouble more often than not. Still, as his grandfather had been fond of saying, it was much easier to ask

forgiveness than permission.

With that comforting thought firmly in mind, Lee resolved to do some judicious poking around, starting with the Ranger's old ship. He hadn't been kidding when he'd told Sam it was the worst plasma damage he'd ever seen. That was part of the problem: The severity of the damage was something you just didn't see from portable weapons.

The rest of the week was a busy one, though the weather improved. Sam found himself dropping gratefully back into a comfortable pattern. Nothing too serious, nothing too routine; just the right balance. In fact, if anything, he was finding it easier than ever to diagnose various animal ailments and deliver the right treatment. If he did get puzzled, it took only seconds before he heard an 'inner' voice, guiding him firmly to where the problem was faster than a deep scan with the Gauntlet could.

Some vets, under similar conditions, would be second-guessing themselves to distraction, if they weren't putting themselves on the sick list and checking in for psych counseling. Not Sam. He took it all in stride, dispensing pill, potion or patch as needed.

For all the pleasure he took from his work, though, he still couldn't ignore a persistent knot of tension in his guts. It wasn't anything physical; more like a sensation of something \_missing,\_ something \_forgotten,\_ something which was terribly important. The worst part was the feeling simply wouldn't go away! Every time he tried to pin it down, the memories fled like a chipmunk fleeing a hawk.

\_This is one hawk with a lot of patience\_ Sam thought, grimly. \_You can run, but you can't hide!\_

One prominent fragment did surface, towards the end of the last day of the work week. As Sam was climbing back into his ship, after treating a mountain goat with an injured knee joint, he had a sudden flash of a standard-issue UNEC field notebook, bound in blue Duraplastic, with his name and badge number on the inside cover.

Realization and relief hit him in equal measures, and he dropped into his seat with a rueful chuckle. His notebook hadn't been collected from his old ship. That was it! \_And, with my luck \_he thought, \_I'll need the thing soon enough.\_

He put in a call to the maintenance crew as he lifted off. Sergeant Lee was on duty, and nodded when Sam made his request. "Your old ship's still there, Doc, but you'd best check it first thing when you get in. It's going out with the rest of the month's load of scraps tomorrow, when Fleet Surplus comes by. Do you want me to go see if I can find your book? I can drop it in your box in the squad room."

Sam shook his head. "Don't trouble yourself, Sergeant. This was my mistake, my responsibility. Thanks for checking, though."

Lee nodded and signed off. Sam, spurred by rising excitement, throttled his speed up to just under the limit for non-pursuit status and continued towards Alladale. He was five minutes out when the TLC alarm sounded, its display lit with a flashing red symbol in the shape of a large bird. Sam's eyebrows shot up as he read the

details.

WHITE-TAILED SEA EAGLE, KWL-62042-N62054, DOWN AND INJURED it read, along with a set of GNSS coordinates. A heartbeat later, a line connecting the bird icon with a blue triangle, indicating Sam's current position, flickered to life.

Sam tapped the 'ACCEPT' flag on the screen, changed course, and accelerated further. The 'KWL' in the TLC code indicated the bird's territory as Kirkwall, an island community eighty kilometers south-southwest of Alladale's northern patrol border. The embedded 'N' told him the bird was one of a mated and nesting pair, along with the mate's serial number.

The screen filled in more details as he drew closer. The downed bird was female, eleven years old, no previous problems. However, the current readings showed heart rate, blood pressure and respiration all dangerously high.

Fifteen minutes later, as he landed near the bird and jumped down, he saw why. She was tangled in a large scrap of fishing net, eyes glazed and chest pumping frantically. Spatters of bright red stood out against the grass and the bird's feathers, coming from a very visible gash on her right leg where the mesh was wrapped tight. The sight had Sam swearing very creatively as he gathered his equipment.

Upset as he was, he was quick to rein in his emotions as he approached the bird. She eyed him with a mixture of defiance and fear, but made no sound. "Easy, big lady" Sam said, softly, as he sidled closer and eased down to a kneeling position, parallel with the bird rather than facing.

\_Not too bad\_ he mused, studying the way the net scrap ran. \_Have that mess off in about five minutes.\_

Working quickly, while the bird was relatively quiet, he reached into his bag, brought out a square of black cloth and placed it over the eagle's head. Tiny magnets sewn into the edges clicked together, forming an effective hood.

Other than one indignant squawk, the eagle made no further protest, for birds-of-prey are even more sight-oriented and sight-dependent than humans. If they couldn't see what was going on around them, they perceived no threat and remained calm. Sam was taking no chances, though. The feet of a white-tailed eagle, close cousin to the American Bald eagle, could exert a gripping force of over five hundred kilograms.

Such strong feet, with their needle-sharp talons, were capable of inflicting considerable damage on whatever " or whoever " their owner was mad at. With this in mind, his next step was to uncap a small squeeze-bulb and spray two shots of Tiletamine-4 aerosol in under the blinding cloth. A few moments later, the rapid movement of the bird's breast slowed. "That's better" Sam muttered.

With his hands now safely encased in special gloves, he made short work of the mesh with a pair of bandage snips. Once the offending material was cleared away, he went to work on the injured leg, cleaning away the blood and spraying the wound liberally with Dermiseal. The chemical bandage would serve as a local painkiller,

antiseptic and protective barrier, keeping the injury dry and clean as it healed.

Next, he exchanged one protective glove for his Gauntlet and scanned the bird's vital signs: Pulse, blood pressure, temperature, respiration, neural activity " all were normal, allowing for the anaesthetic. Nodding with satisfaction, he reached down and pulled away the blinding cloth.

Bright golden eyes blinked, then settled on him with a glazed look. Sam backed away a bit farther, giving the bird plenty of room, but he stayed on his knees. A few minutes later, the eagle chirped to herself, then lurched to her feet and started looking around.

\_She's a beauty\_ Sam thought, admiring the alternating patterns of golden brown and dark brown on her wings and leg feathers. The patterns shaded to a more consistent light brown, with just a few flecks of white, on her neck and head. Her tail, as the name of her species implied, was white as new-driven snow. The Gauntlet had given her weight as six kilos, but Sam would have sworn she couldn't be over five.

His breath caught as the bird stretched one enormous wing, then the other, and made a couple of experimental flaps. \_You are magnificent!\_ He thought.

The bird froze in mid-flap and stared at him " \_hard\_ " with one eye, then the other, before folding her wings. She held his gaze long enough to make him blink, then lifted her injured leg. Powerful talons flexed as she examined the now-sealed wound.

Finally, she put the leg back down and walked over to one of the discarded pieces of mesh. She subjected the section to the same intense gaze, pecked at it, then looked up at Sam.

Another fragment of memory stirred. He met the bird's gaze, and spoke softly. "Yes, you were all tangled up in that stuff. I freed you."

The bird's next move caught him off-guard. With one wing-assisted hop, she sprang into the air and landed on the ground directly in front of him, less than a meter away. Her expression, far from the wild fury Sam usually associated with large raptors, carried something he'd never seen in any bird before: Was it... could it really be... \_gratitude?!\_

Before he could think, move, or speak, the eagle delivered her next surprise. Crine feathers extended, in the manner of a bird who is relaxed and confident, she reached up with an open beak " and started preening Sam's beard.

The vet was too dumbfounded to do anything more than hold absolutely still. Yes, allopreening was common practice between birds showing affection to each other, and by some captive hawks and falcons to their falconers, but this was a \_wild\_ eagle! All six kilos and two-meter wingspan of her, sitting calmly in front of him, doing her level best to make sure his beard was arranged properly!

After a couple of minutes, when the eagle seemed satisfied with her work, she turned around and hopped out to where she had wing-room for

takeoff. As her wings opened to their full span, the bird looked back at Sam with one bright gold eye. Suddenly, two words echoed in his mind, as clearly as if someone standing next to him had spoken: Fly well!

The wings descended, carrying the bird swiftly into the darkening sky. All Sam could do was sit there, gaping, stunned into silent wonder. After a minute or so, he shook his head and climbed to his feet. "That last bit is not going in my report" he muttered to himself, as he stowed his equipment and got ready to leave.

Murphy wasn't done playing with him, though. As he closed the cargo compartment door and started up the boarding ladder, a loud chirp made him pause. He looked around, paying close attention to the tree line. Suddenly, a shaft of the setting sun revealed an iridescent surface of chalcedony blue, moving swiftly through the lower branches. Sam held perfectly still, waiting for whatever it was to realize he was no threat.

He didn't have to wait long. The movements stopped for a moment, then " something " popped out into the open air, its wingbeats sounding like a toy helicopter. Once again, Sam's jaw dropped. "What in the name of all that's holy are you?!" He gasped.

Even as he spoke, he was startled by a strong feeling of familiarity. He'd seen creatures like this before, but " that was impossible! No winged lizards existed in the present day. Even if they did, the energy required to sustain flight would require any such creature to be endothermic, and any first-year vet student could tell you reptiles were exothermic.

And yet, there was the impossible, hovering barely three meters away, chirping at him excitedly. The chirps seemed to take on a pattern, the sounds echoing in his head until they became intelligible: FoundYouFoundYouFoundYouFound...!

A sharp, deep sound suddenly split the air. Sam twitched violently, nearly losing his grip on the ladder. Now what? He wondered. It had sounded like a cross between an annoyed Stellar sea lion and a very large wolf " and yet, once again, it was maddeningly familiar!

The effect of the sound on the blue flying lizard was much more dramatic. It flinched all over, a look coming into its bulbous eyes which made Sam think of a naughty child, caught with their hand in the candy jar.

The thunderous bark sounded again. The blue lizard squawked a reply " and then hurtled forward to land right next to Sam, clinging to the edge of the cockpit and meeting the startled vet's gaze head-on. Once more, words popped into his head: Nalu find you, now you find us! The edge of one leathery wing brushed Sam's arm, then the little blue was darting away towards the forest.

By now, Sam's mind was completely frazzled. Just before the blue disappeared, though, enough of his Ranger training leaked through to make him snatch up his pocket holocamera and start recording - only to have the tiny unit flash a LOW BATTERY warning at him and shut itself down. Cursing himself for a fool, he dived into his ship and powered up the drive. Seconds later, he was flying a search pattern

over the forest canopy, watching for the slightest hint of movement or flash of color which was not part of any tree.

Murphy decided to do an encore. Just as Sam finished one leg of his pattern, and turned in the opposite direction, two heads popped out from under the dense canopy behind him. One was chalcedony blue, with darker blue iridescence down its back.

The other was much larger, black as obsidian. The last of the sun's rays reflected briefly off a pair of storm-gray eyes. Both dragons waited, barely visible, until the craft was well out of sight, then lifted into the sky and vanished towards the north and home.

It was 20:40 when Sam finally returned to Alladale, over two hours past his official end-of-shift. This, in itself, was not unheard of, though he'd have to explain himself to Dash after the weekend. \_No matter\_ he thought, with a wry grin, as he shut everything down and dropped to the hangar floor. \_Wait 'til he sees the holopics I got!\_

He headed for the maintenance bay immediately, heeding Sergeant Lee's earlier advice. His old aircar was still there, a red SURPLUS DISPOSAL tag dangling from its nose gear. It took Sam less than ten minutes of searching to realize his notebook was not in it. "Damn" he muttered, slapping his hand on the pilot's seat in frustration. "Cleaning crew got it."

He looked down at where his hand had landed, startled by the feel of a rough edge where there should have been nothing but smooth velour. He lifted his hand, staring in confusion at the burned patch, then frowned. "When did that happen?" he muttered.

Fragments of images flickered through his memory. Something about a feather, and staying out of the way of "what? " when it sneezed...

It was gone. He grunted in frustration, and headed back towards the main hangar. Much to his surprise, he found Sergeant Lee waiting for him. The tech was in civvies, and he wore an expression Sam could only describe as 'thoroughly disgusted.' "Problem, Sergeant?"

The tech gave a weary wave. "Jarod, please, when I'm off-duty. Yeah, problem, but not one with you or your ship. You live in Belfast, right? Out near the airport?"

Sam nodded. "Up in the hills off the southeast end of the runway. Why?"

Lee jerked a thumb in the general direction of the staff parking lot. "Lift impeller let go in my car, and you're the only other person on the day shift who lives anywhere close to where I'm staying " Raven Manor? Off Church Road?" Again, a nod. "Could I hitch a ride home with you? I ordered the parts I need, but they won't be here until Monday."

Sam stifled a sigh. He was tired, and frustrated with his fruitless search efforts. Even more annoying, his holocam shots had been nothing but forest thanks to firing the thing too late. Still, Lee had been very helpful that morning. \_And I was going to eat at my brother's place tonight, anyway.\_



"Sure" Sam said, presenting a cheerful front. "Raven's not far out of the way at all, at least by air. Let me get changed, and we'll scoot. Have you eaten yet?"

"Just snacks" Jarod replied, anticipation drawing a grin from him. "Didn't I hear someone say your brother owns a pub?"

Ten minutes later, they were in Sam's Volkswagen Cloudsplitter, speeding south-southeast on autopilot at a tidy 300 kph. By the time they'd crossed over the Island of Mull, and turned due south for Belfast, they were chatting as easily as if they'd been friends from birth. Sam was pleasantly surprised by how much they had in common, including an interest in mythical animals. Jarod was curious as to how far Sam had been able to share this particular interest with other co-workers.

"Not very" he said, giving him a brief version of the toy T-rex incident. "I came close with Gerry Hoshino, but it never really went beyond 'drinking buddies' and speculation. We just don't have enough in common. Just as one example, he's heavily into snow sports â€" loves to ski, snowboard, and the like â€" but I get the shivers just looking at the white stuff!"

"Then why" Jarod asked, "did you ever pick a duty station like Alladale? You have to know what winters in this part of the world can be like."

Sam shrugged. "Best I could get at the time. By the time my class lot was drawn, after I finished Ranger Basic, all the warm spots had been spoken for. Funny, though... I always meant to apply for a transfer, but the place kept growing on me a little at a time.

"If I had to point to one thing which changed my mind about being anywhere but here, I'd have to say it was about fifteen years back. I was on holiday leave, visiting my parents. It was just turning from winter to spring, and I'd had trouble sleeping the night before, so I got up a bit before dawn and just hiked around for a while, critter-watching."

Jarod nodded. "That's one big reason I've stayed here. Hard to beat the variety of wildlife. What happened then?"

Sam shook his head. "To this day, it still amazes me to think about it. I was feeling pretty miserable that morning because it had been a rough winter. I was all set to file my transfer request the minute I got in. Suddenly, out of the blue, a raven lands square on my shoulder. No hesitation, no fear, just... well, plop!"

Jarod's eyebrows crept up. "Someone's pet?"

"Not this bird" Sam replied, emphatically. "No leg band, and we didn't know anyone else in the area who had more than a dog or cat. Anyway, it surprised me so much all I could do was just freeze in place. Here's this huge bird, with an equally huge beak, just staring calmly at me from centimeters away!

"After a moment, he did something I've never seen or heard another raven do since, outside of trained show birds: Started whistling the chorus from an old Kate Crossan song, 'Come by the Hills,' which also

happens to be a favorite of mine!"

"Whoa!" Jarod replied, grinning widely. "I know ravens are champion mimics, like most of the corvid family, but what are the odds?!"

"It gets better" Sam said, matching Jarod's grin. "The bird gets all the way through the first chorus and then starts singing the last part of it! As in vocalizing! 'And the cares of tomorrow must wait 'til this day is done.' Oh, it was gravelly; that's just the way the bird's vocal cords are built. But it was clear, Jarod, as clear as you're hearing me right now, and on key!"

"After that, the bird leans over, nibbles at my hair for a moment, then takes off. That's when I decided it'd be worth staying around, and to blazes with the weather."

They sat in companionable silence for a moment, gazing out the windscreen into the star-speckled night. Finally, Jarod spoke, his gaze fixed on the half-moon. "Sam... you know as well as anyone how quick gossip gets around, especially among us lowly techs"

"Lowly?!" Sam replied, gazing at his passenger in astonishment. "Jarod, it's people like you who keep us in the air! That's not something I'd call 'lowly' at the worst of times."

Jarod waved one hand. "Granted, and I thank you for recognizing it. Not everyone does. What I wanted to say is I had a look at your old aircar anyway. I found your notebook, but I also found a couple of other things. I'm not quite sure what they are, or what their significance is, but I think you'll find them... interesting."

The Cloudsplitter had begun its descent into city traffic lanes, its autopilot responding smoothly to commands from the Belfast Regional ATCC. Sam eyed his passenger with a jaundiced look. "No more cloak-and-dagger, please!"

Jarod's expression was neutral. "I'm not calling them anything more than 'anomalies'" he said, calmly. "Do you want to know, or not?"

The car's onboard computer dinged at them. "Destination reached" said a female synthesized voice, with just a trace of Austrian accent, as the craft settled neatly into an open space on the roof of the pub's building.

"No, it's all right! I mean, I want to know" Sam said, hastily, as he went through the shutdown sequence. He sighed. "It's just... It seems like ever since I woke up, people have been acting like they're walking on eggs whenever they're around me. Now I'm on edge because of it."

He grinned sheepishly. "Honestly, Jarod, you're the first person who's treated me as 'normal' this entire week. If you've found something even close to explaining what's going on, I would love to hear about it!"

The tech relaxed, collected his backpack, and climbed out. "Over dinner, then."

The indoor stairs were closed for repair, so they had to use the outside ladder to descend to street level. Jarod was startled to see Sam take to the rungs like he'd been born to them. He even jumped from the last few, when he was about a meter above the sidewalk, and landed in a neat crouch. "I thought you were afraid of heights, outside an aircar?" The tech said, as he made his own way down. "Everyone on the flight line knows it."

Sam looked confused. His gaze flickered between Jarod and the open-air ladder, and he took a slow breath. "I... thought I was, too!" Experimentally, he climbed back up to almost two meters height, then turned halfway around and gazed fearlessly down. Not the slightest twinge went through him. He was simply a short distance above the ground, like he'd been every day for almost two decades on his normal patrol runs.

Puzzled, he went down a couple of rungs and jumped off again. Far from being afraid, he found the brief sensation of free-fall to be exhilarating. He landed with a grunt next to Jarod, and shrugged. "I guess I'm over it" he said, as they entered the pub.

A few minutes later, they were comfortably settled in a larger-than-normal booth Sam's brother kept reserved for family. Sounds of singing â€" sometimes off-key, but never less than enthusiastic â€" permeated the pine-and-ale scented air, and LED floodlights cast a warm yellow-white glow over the entire place in stark contrast to the clear, cool night. They'd barely started looking at the menus when a strong Irish alto boomed out over the rest of the room's noise. "Welcome back, little brother!"

Sam braced himself for the shoulder-slap he knew was coming, then returned it as best he could. "Thanks, Paddy!" he replied, with a huge smile. "This is Jarod Lee, our lead aircar tech at the base."

Patrick Shay, or 'Paddy' to family and friends, didn't lose a hint of his smile as he gave Jarod a bone-crusher of a handshake. "And top of the evenin' to you, Jarod Lee! Sure, and you must be desperate for company if you're hangin' around with this loser!" He glanced at Sam.

Jarod gave as good as he got. His hand flexed slightly, and Paddy â€" much to Sam's surprise â€" winced. "Careful, lad, I'll need that hand later!" He exclaimed, making a show of examining his fingers for damage. "For someone who looks like they're in desperate need of a decent meal, you've got an Irishman's grip."

The tech grinned back at the huge, bear-like redhead. "It's all the work I have to do to keep your brother, and his buddies, in the air. The way they treat their ships, you'd think they were in an aerial demolition derby!"

Paddy roared with laughter at this, and delivered a shoulder slap to Jarod. "You're all right, lad! So, gents, what'll it be tonight? Ronin's got a fresh batch of Shepherd's Pie, just out of the cooker."

"I'll go for that" Sam said. "And mead, please."

The barkeep looked surprised. "Mead, Sam? You? I thought you didn't

fancy the sweet stuff."

"Tastes change, bro" he replied, then frowned slightly. "Though darned if I can remember when I started liking it."

Jarod ordered the same, and the two were soon happily munching and drinking the evening away. "This is great stuff" Jarod said, setting the unfinished half of his pie aside. "I can tell what I'll be taking home for breakfast."

Sam nodded, and took a swallow from his mug. "Ronin always had a thing for cooking. Learned from his mom, who learned from his grandparents." He eyed his drink thoughtfully. "Not bad at all. Not quite as strong as the stuff I had on Berk, but... still..."

He trailed off, a faraway look in his eyes. "Sam?" Jarod said, worriedly. "Are you OK?"

The spell broke. "Now that was weird!" Sam said. "I just had this flash of a huge party, and someone announcing I was now 'Of Berk,' whatever that means. Dammit!" He slammed his mug down, sending droplets onto the table. "It's gone again! If I were to wish for one thing tonight, it'd be for an answer to what in Saint Blaise's socks is happening to my frelling memory!"

Jarod nodded, and lifted his backpack onto his seat. "Funny you should ask. I think I can help with that."

He unzipped the middle compartment, and started pulling things out. The first was a familiar notebook, somewhat the worse for wear around the edges, which he handed to Sam with a flourish. "This, oddly enough, was wedged in the space between the inner bracing and outer hull of your primary cargo door" he said. "That's why the edges are beat up. I almost missed it, and had a hell of a time getting it out."

While Sam examined the book, and started flipping through the pages, Jarod dug deeper and pulled out a clear Duraplast cylinder about half the length of a cigar tube. Small flakes of blue, white and green, varying from a couple of millimeters to a few centimeters in size, were sliding around inside. "What in blazes...?" Sam muttered, taking the tube and peering at the flakes.

Jarod didn't reply right away, as he was still digging. Finally, he came up with a standard-issue storage case for holocamera memory cards. Inside was one such card, blackened on part of its surface, with signs of melting around the edges. "Looks like its been through a fire" Sam said. "It was in my old ship?"

The tech nodded as he zipped the compartment closed, and put the pack back on the floor. "Caught in one of your seat springs" he said. "Must have happened during your... well, the official word is 'crash,' but..."

"But what?" Sam pressed.

He sighed and eyed the vet carefully. "Before I go any farther, I need to warn you: What I've found out is likely to make you question how seriously UNEC takes its ethics."

Sam looked startled, then snorted. "Oh, posh" he said. "Ethics is probably the one thing UNEC takes more seriously than anything else."

The tech gave him an odd look, a mixture of surprise and... was that \_pity?\_ Finally, Sam waved a hand. "Go ahead, then. I'll reserve judgment."

Jarod nodded. "From the moment I saw the damage to your old ship, something didn't seem right. Oh, it was from a plasma charge, right enough, but what surprised me was how far the damage went."

He reached for his portable computer, tapped a few commands into it, and held it out to Sam. "The top image is a narrow-focus metallurgical scan of your old ship's nose. The bottom is of similar damage on Hennessy's ship, taken just after you two tangled with those raiders a couple of months back. Notice anything odd?"

Sam gazed at the display for nearly a minute. "I'm no tech" he said, slowly, "but, if I'm understanding this, the damage on my old ship runs too deep for a hand weapon to have made, even one which was overcharged."

"Right you are" Jarod replied, retrieving the handheld. "Even stranger, there's no sign of impact damage at all, \_anywhere\_ in the ship's structure. Now, you were flipping through your notebook a moment ago. What do you make of it?"

For answer, Sam flipped the book around and opened it. "I never thought I'd say this, but I don't know \_what\_ the blazes to make of it" he replied. "Look at this... an archway of some sort, symbols around the perimeter..."

He kept flipping. Suddenly, he stopped and flipped a few pages back. His lips moved slightly as he mouthed his way through the formulas and notes on the page. "Why in the world did I need to cook up a batch of Brevenol-D by hand?" He muttered. "CME-2 works far better."

His eyes widened as he flipped over the next few pages. Suddenly, he stopped on one, his jaw dropping. "Saint Blaise Above" he breathed.

Jarod nodded. "I hope you'll forgive me, but I took the liberty of looking through it before you got back. Any idea why you would have written 'DRAGON SPECIES' at the top of the page, along with notes on their common names and physical characteristics?"

An icicle substituted itself for Sam's spine. His hands tingled, and his pulse pounded in his ears. It was all so \_familiar, \_ but every time he read one of the strange words (clearly in his handwriting), and tried to push beyond the word itself, he ran up against a mental wall. Finally, he closed the book and looked at Jarod. "I have not the slightest idea" he said, softly. "Dragons are mythical, though. Maybe I was thinking of writing a fiction story?"

He picked up the sample tube and looked over the contents again. Sapphire iridescence sparkled across what he now recognized as scales. "These look just like the ones on that flying lizard I saw this afternoon" he muttered. "And you also found these in my old

ship?"

The tech nodded. "Caught in the carpeting below the rear seat. Took a sampling vac to get them out. I wouldn't have seen them at all if I hadn't been using a flashlight."

Sam nodded, dazedly. His thoughts were whirling in tight circles, and he didn't like any of the implications popping out of the chaos.

"Here's the clincher" Jarod said, holding out his portable computer again. "These are your ship's Hobbs meter readings from just before and just after its supposed 'crash.' Notice anything?"

Sam gazed at the readout, first in confusion then with growing outrage. "If it were out of commission for two weeks, as I've been told" he said, tightly, "there would be no difference in the timestamp between the last 'Shutdown' flag and the next 'Startup' flag. According to this, the ship was operated for around fifteen hours \_after\_ I supposedly crashed!"

"Bingo" Jarod said, downing the last of his mead. "Sam, what you've been told so far just doesn't match up with what I've discovered. I don't have any more facts than what I've shown you, but I do have some ideas. Want to hear them?"

The vet nodded. "OK" Jarod continued. "I think someone â€" and it'd have to be someone very high up in UNEC â€" is covering up your crash, or incident, or whatever else really happened to you in those two weeks. All the official reports say one thing, and they seem to check out to the Nth degree on paper, but you can't hide facts from a good tech."

"It must have been pretty nasty if I can't remember it" Sam replied, over steepled fingers. "But I've never been one to run from trauma before. I'd never have become a vet if I did."

"Couldn't agree more" Jarod said. "But, in case you still need convincing, take a look at your arms. Pretty well tanned, aren't they? Kind of unusual for this time of year."

Sam blinked, then looked each arm over, his expression growing more puzzled by the second. "If I'd been out for two weeks, I wouldn't be anywhere near this dark."

"Right again" said Jarod. "Now, couple all these little things together and tell me what you get."

"Too damn many anomalies" Sam grumbled.

Jarod nodded. "One of my favorite quotes from Arthur Conan Doyle's works is 'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.'"

Sam looked at him, startled. Jarod held the vet's gaze firmly. "Sam, I think the 'truth' in this case is someone's deliberately tampered with your memory."

\_Welcome back, and my apologies for posting late. Without going into (nauseating) detail, suffice to say several network issues have taken my full attention since I got home last night. As it is, I'm running on about four hours sleep and sheer willpower.  
><em>

\_In any case: Thanks to Frumious Bandersnatch for the review and comments. They're much appreciated! In answer to your observation, you're correct: Sam does indeed have a high tolerance for The Weird in general, though he's still able to be startled. This would, I think, be true of anyone who grew up with SF&F literature as an integral part of their life (remember the brief background I've sketched out for him).  
><em>

\_This is the first chapter where some of the 'pop culture' references I make get pretty thick, enough so that I feel some few bits of explanation are called for. The physical descriptions of Moffett Field and the surrounding area are very real, and there is indeed an air museum at the field, open to the public and run by the MF Historical Society. Here's a link to their site: \_

\_Clarke's Charcoal Broiler is also very real, located exactly at the spot I describe. Although a bit on the pricey side, they are well worth a visit (and, yes, they really do have a great turkey burger, among lots of other choices).\_

\_Any of my readers who are techies, especially those who live in the Bay Area, are likely to get their own sensation of 'Deja Vu' as they read about Tesla's Basement. This is because, though mostly fictitious, it is based on a surplus store I've been a regular at since the mid-1980's (and yes, they are something special; have to be, to have survived and thrived as long as they have!) Anyone who correctly guesses the real name of the place can take two Berk Doubloons and a handful of Quatloos from petty cash.\_

\_Happy reading!\_

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 11\*\***

"\_Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."\_

\_(Ralph Waldo Emerson)\_

Sam stared at Jarod for nearly a minute, open-mouthed, then snorted derisively. "\_Tampered\_ with my memory? As in brainwashing?! Jarod, you can't be serious! The only time memory erasure is even considered is with mental patients â€" extreme cases of paranoia, agoraphobia and the like. Even then, you need a medical order, signed by no fewer than three GenMed councillors and issued by a Crown Court judge!"

Jarod shrugged. "Do you have a better explanation? You said it yourself, Sam. You know something's wrong with your memory and you're trying to find out what."

Sam digested this for a moment. "Simple test" Jarod continued, consulting his computer. "What was the disposal tag serial number on your old ship?"

"DD-470928-Q2" Sam replied without hesitation.

"Good. What color was the smuggler ship you and Hoshino chased down before your 'crash?'"

"Ugly bright mustard yellow" Sam said, wincing at the memory.

"Right again. Who won the World Cup Soccer game in 2038, and where was it?"

"Sweden, against Brazil, playing in Stockholm." Sam grinned. "Caused quite a stir. It was the first match they'd won in at least a dozen years, and Leif Gundersson sprained his ankle making the winning kick!"

"Good. Now, what happened the morning after your crash?"

Sam scowled. "You know I don't remember."

"Exactly!" Jarod exclaimed, holding up both hands. "So how is it you remember the details about a soccer match which happened twenty-two years before you were born, plus trivia like your old ship's disposal number, but you've got a three-week gap with no previous history of memory problems?"

Sam squirmed in his seat. "Short-term traumatic amnesiaâ€"

"â€"isn't so selective" Jarod finished. "Especially in people with eidetic memory. A sense of Deja Vu, which you said you've been getting hit with quite a bit lately, is far less normal for you than memory blackouts."

Sam didn't have a ready answer. He eyed his companion speculatively. "Are you sure you're just an aircar tech?"

Jarod smiled, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. "I read a lot" he said, with a shrug. When Sam's gaze stayed on him, he sighed. "OK, I read a lot and I've got a lot of hobbies" he said. "My father was, among other things, a shrink. I'm a ham radio operator, with a BSEE, and I dabble quite a bit in cryptography. When I'm not soldering something together, or puzzling over the Nazca geoglyphs, I do wildlife photography and star-gaze."

Sam blinked. "When do you sleep?"

"Whenever my cats demand it" Jarod shot back. "Look... In all fairness, I could be wrong. I could be jumping at shadows where there aren't any. But what if I'm right? Even halfway? Can you afford not to consider it?"

Sam was indeed considering it, in spite of his earlier protests. The implications of what Jarod had said were... disturbing, to say the least. \_If someone's been screwing with my head, who? And more importantly, why?! We all have security clearances. What's sensitive enough to make them â€" and who the hell are 'them,' anyway? â€" want



to erase a memory?\_

For the first time he could remember, Sam felt an odd sense of betrayal. \_Why would anyone in UNEC even \_think\_ of pulling a stunt like this?\_

"If I'm right" Jarod continued, as if reading Sam's next thought. "You have to be damn careful who you trust. Even your bossâ€"

"Not Dash!" Sam snapped. "Never. He's probably the one person I \_can\_ trust, unconditionally, on the whole bloody base!"

Jarod simply gave him a pitying look. "Don't be so naive. You said it yourself; the decision to do memory erasure can only be issued â€" officially, anyway â€" by a Crown Court order."

The vet snorted. "You're paranoid, Jarod. Anyone ever tell you that?"

The tech rolled his eyes skyward. "More times than I can count. Doesn't necessarily mean I'm wrong."

"Just for the sake of argument" Sam said, "let's say you're right. For whatever reason, part of my memory's been wiped. Hard as I've tried, I can't seem to remember more than fragments, which probably means it was a first-class job. What am I supposed to do? Barge into Dash's office, tell him I know I got my brains scrambled, and demand to know what really happened? The orders would have had to come through him, and the real details are probably locked in a high-security file neither of us has access to!"

"Yes and no" Jarod replied, with a half-grin. "There are ways around any security lock. It all depends on how daring you feel."

"I'm going to pretend I never heard that" Sam said, wincing. "I want to know what happened, but not at the risk of a court-martial, dishonorable discharge and an involuntary vacation at Club Fed. There's got to be another way!"

"Seems to me" Jarod replied, slowly, "someone else much higher up than either of us has already committed a court-martial offense by screwing with your head. Or are you forgetting the recipient of a memory wipe must, by law, be informed of the fact it was done?"

Sam stared at him, uncomprehending for a minute. Then his eyes widened. "Bloody hell" he gasped. "This means I really \_can\_ demand an explanation! I'll go see Dash first thing Mondayâ€"

"Whoa! Not so fast" Jarod said, holding up both hands. "What makes you think you'll get anything other than a firm brush-off? Besides, the law says you only get to be informed a wipe took place. It \_also\_ says, specifically, the information targeted for wipe will \_not\_ be revealed to the recipient."

"Then we're right back where we started" Sam said, disgustedly, as he slumped back into his seat. "Neither of us have the clearance to find out what really happened, and we'd attract the wrong kind of attention if we tried."

"I don't know whether to be flattered or annoyed you said 'we'" Jarod

replied, as he dug into his backpack. A moment later he came up with an old clamshell-style cellphone, which had clearly seen better days, and held it out to Sam. He took it cautiously, as if afraid it would fall apart at the slightest touch.

Fortunately, it turned out to be more rugged than it looked. Sam flipped it open. "I didn't know you collected antiques" he said, eyeing the device. "No camera, no touchscreen, no voice-recognition... it's audio-only, isn't it?"

"It serves its purpose" Jarod said. "In this case, its purpose is to give you a choice." He took a deep breath, and continued. "Sam, you've probably guessed it'd be dangerous to show your notebook to anyone else. It would be just as dangerous if we were to continue talking about this during duty hours. In fact, if you try, I'll deny everything!"

Sam nodded. "Agreed!"

"Okay" Jarod replied. "Choice One: Recognize you've been memory-scrubbed and duly informed of it, according to the letter of the law. It's clear to anyone with eyes the wipe hasn't had the slightest negative effect on your work. If anything, the rumor mill says you're better at it now than you were before the... incident. That's all the higher-ups are worried about.

"You can accept the wipe was for good reason, bury your notebook somewhere and get on with your life. You can walk away, have another decade or so of great service, and retire in comfort on your pension. End of story."

Sam's response was a single word: "Or?"

Jarod smiled slightly, then tapped the phone. "Dial 4242 any time during the next 24 hours. Tell whoever answers I sent you, who you are, and let them show you just how deep the rabbit hole likely goes."

"But cellphones can be traced, just likeâ€"

"Not this one" Jarod replied, firmly, tapping the phone again for emphasis. "There's more under that beat-up cover than meets the eye."

Sam eyed the device as though it had turned into an annoyed tarantula. "You said '24 hours.' What happens if I don't do anything with it in that time?"

"It becomes a paperweight. Blank memory, non-functional CPU. Same thing happens after you hang up from making the call, so make sure you've got a solid signal before you try. I've only got the one unit, so you only get one chance!"

Sam rolled his eyes skyward. "Oh, great" he muttered. "Still more cloak-and-dagger. Can't I just get a straight answer for once?!"

Jarod shrugged, climbed out of the booth, and slung his pack over one shoulder. "Straight answers are tricky things" he said. "Before you can find them, you need to know what â€" and more importantly, who

and how " to ask. The people on the other end of that speed dial are the 'who,' and they can figure out the 'how' more often than not."

He looked pensive for a moment, then continued. "I'll tell you this much: They won't expect you to do anything illegal, but don't be surprised if you find yourself treading in some gray areas. If the thought makes you uncomfortable, just toss the thing down the recycle chute. It's your life."

With a final nod, Jarod thanked him for dinner and the ride down, and started to walk out. "Wait!" Sam called. "Don't you still need a lift?"

The only response was a wave as the tall tech pushed through the door leading to the street. Puzzled, Sam followed. He was just in time to see the tail and strobe lights of an aircab as it lifted into the night sky.

It hit him then: Jarod had never needed him for a lift; the entire evening had been neatly arranged, and he had walked right into it! His temper flared for a moment at such blatant manipulation, then cooled just as quickly as the phone in his pocket brushed his side. Manipulation or not, Jarod had left the next step up to him.

Ten minutes later, having finished his drink and bid his brother a good evening, Sam was in the air for the short hop home, his thoughts whirling like dust in a tornado.

He didn't remember falling asleep. His mind was a complete blank until he suddenly sat bolt upright, going from 'comfortably unconscious' to 'adrenaline overload' in just over five seconds. \_Talk about a three-AM thought. All I have to do is get hold of Gerry! He was with me, he'll know what happened!\_

A glance at the bedside clock showed 05:55. Sam snapped on the light, wincing at the strong glow, and fumbled for the phone. He hit the 'Speaker' button and punched in Gerry's code.

There was an unusually long delay, then the device emitted three ascending tones in quick sequence. At the same moment, the screen flashed NUMBER INVALID. PLEASE TRY AGAIN.

"Some things never change" Sam muttered, disgustedly, as he reset and tried again. He frowned as he got the same result. Resetting once again, he dialed UNEC Operations and requested Gerry Hoshino's status.

Again, there was an unusually long delay. When the officer came back on the line, a puzzled frown creased her attractive red-headed features. "Can you confirm his badge number for me, sir?" She said, in a lilting alto. "And spell the last name?"

Now it was Sam's turn to be puzzled. "The badge code is AL-14, Ranger Gerald Hoshino. H-o-s-h-i-n-o. I need his current status and location, please."

Another pause, then: "I'm sorry, sir. Badge AL-14 is listed as 'Inactive,' and there is no one named 'Hoshino,' H-o-s-h-i-n-o, at any of UNEC's European field stations or regional headquarters."

Sam blinked. "That can't be. We've served together out of the same location for the past ten years! Are you sure you're looking in the right place?"

The officer's features became a mask. "There is no one with the name or badge number you gave me, sir, currently active in the UNEC Ranger Division. That is all the information I have."

Dazed, Sam muttered his thanks and disconnected. A chill went down his spine, one which had nothing to do with the room's temperature. \_If Gerry was the only other witness to what happened, and UNEC does want to keep it under wraps...\_

A sense of urgency gripped him, one step below panic. He dressed quickly, and was still running a comb through his hair as he dashed out of his apartment and up the two flights of stairs to the parking pad on the roof. He was in his car and airborne just as the eastern sky was starting to brighten, though he chafed at the speed, altitude and course limits imposed on civilian craft by the ATCC. If not for them, he could have made it to Gerry's apartment in under five minutes.

With the limits, it took nearly twenty. Sam was out the driver's door and sprinting for the stairs before the car's turbine had spun down. He took them two at a time, and skidded to a halt in front of Gerry's door. He pounded on it, and called "Gerry! It's Sam! Are you OK?"

The silence was broken only by birds. Sam pounded again. "Ranger Hoshino!" He yelled, in his best imitation of Dash's parade-ground tone. "Report!"

Still nothing. Sam tried the knob, and was surprised when the door opened without any undue resistance. His jaw dropped at the sight: The apartment was completely empty. Not a stick of furniture, phone sitting on the thin carpet at one end of the room, not a single book or knick-knack on the shelves. All the curtains were open, and a sharp scent of cleaning fluid brushed his nose.

"'Ere, now!" said an annoyed female tenor, in a rich Cockney accent. "Who are you, and wot's all the yellin'? You'll 'ave 'alf the neighbors up with that racket!"

His inquisitor was young, blonde and round-faced. Her blue eyes blazed with indignation and challenge as she confronted him, hands clenched into fists and pressed firmly against her hips. Her entire manner and posture presented a startling contrast to the pink bathrobe and duck-slippers she was wearing, especially since her head barely came up to Sam's collarbone.

Still, the Ranger knew an elemental force when he saw it. "Ah, I... sorry about the... uhh, I meant to say..."

She advanced on him a step. Sam's eyes widened at the compact black shape of a stun-wand which the woman seemed to conjure out of thin air. "Wait, please!" Sam pleaded, as he raised both hands in the air.

Unimpressed, the woman backed him up against a corner of the walkway

rail and snorted. "Oh, we'll wait all right. I've already rung the constables. We'll just wait right 'ere. Now, don't you move a muscle!" She waved the stunner for emphasis, its tip starting to glow blue.

Sam finally found his voice. "You don't understand! I'm a UNEC Ranger. Here's my ID." He slowly extracted his badge case and flipped it open. The woman eyed it suspiciously. "Where are you based, then?" She snapped.

"Alladale Heights, northern Scotland" he replied, flipping the case shut and pocketing it. "I'm sorry about the noise, but I thought another Ranger might be in trouble â€" Gerry Hoshino? Also based at Alladale? He used to have that apartment. I'm a friend of his."

The woman's frown deepened. "Don't know any Hoshino... then again, I'm just fillin' in for Gladys, since she's off on 'oliday. 'Ow do I know you're not puttin' me on, then?" She brandished the wand near Sam's neck, its tip glowing a bit brighter.

"I'm not putting you or anyone else on!" Sam protested, his back pressing painfully against the rail. "My name's Sam Shay. I live on the other side of town, near the airport. My brother runs a pub in the Cathedral district, maybe you've heard of it? Paddy's Den?"

The wand stopped its progress towards his neck, its tip going dark, as the woman's eyes widened. A moment later, it dropped completely. "You're Paddy's brother? Well, why didn't you say so?! 'Ere I was, thinkin' you were a cutpurse an' all! You should 'ave said something earlier!"

The woman backed up a pace, made the stunner disappear into her voluminous robe, then folded her arms over her chest and eyed him crossly. "Paddy's brother or not, that still don't give you no call to go poundin' on doors, wakin' everybody out of their nightcaps at all hours!"

Sam diplomatically neglected to point out he hadn't been given much of a chance to say anything. He also felt it unwise to point out the woman's tenor, echoing clearly across the courtyard, could have woken the dead. "Ah... yes, I'm sorry about that" he said, lowering his voice in the hope he'd serve as an example. "I really thought my friend might be in trouble. His phone wasn't working, our dispatch center... hadn't heard from him, and I... well, I panicked." He shrugged, helplessly.

The woman smiled brightly, revealing a set of incisors liberally decorated with multicolored food scraps, and continued at a volume most opera singers would envy. "Well, no 'arm done. Tell me what your friend looked like, then. Might be I'll 'ave seen 'im 'round, even if I don't know the name."

Sam nodded. "Well, he's about your height, maybe just a hair shorter, slender build, dark skin, black hair and clean-shaven..."

"Oi! I think I 'ave seen 'im!" The woman interrupted, brightening. "Always movin' quick-like, can't seem to slow down, runnin' every which way like a cat wot's got a bee on its bum?"

"That's him!" Sam said, trying to put on a smile of his own.

"Right, now I remember. Left in a big 'urry e' did, along with a couple o' blokes I never seen before. That was... let's see... why, nearly a month ago! Gladys told me all about it, she did. Paid up the rest of his rent in cash, an' off 'e went! No forwardin' address, no phone, no nothing! An' 'e never said anything to you?"

Sam cleared his throat. "I was, ah... away. Out of communications range."

She clucked at him disapprovingly. "Should always carry your phone. Ranger like you ought to know better!"

He couldn't manage anything other than a sheepish grin. "Well" the woman said, walking back over to the empty apartment. She closed the door and locked it, securely, with a passkey. "I should thank you, really... I 'ad no idea this door was unlocked! Must 'ave been the cleaning people." She suddenly grinned brightly at him. "You're a 'andsome one. Care for a spot o' brekky?"

"Ah, No, no thanks" Sam stammered, backing away as hastily as decorum allowed. "I really do have to find my friend, thanks for your help, sorry if I caused any problems!"

He reached the stairs and pounded up them towards the roof, relief lending him some extra speed. Within a minute, he was in the air. Within five, the adrenaline rush had faded, leaving him puzzled, nervous and even a bit queasy. \_Gerry, leaving suddenly, with two guys, probably the day after this whole mess started, no one knows where he is...\_

The car's navigation computer beeped at him. \_"Request destination"\_ it said. Sam twitched, suddenly aware he was hovering in place fifteen meters above the apartment's roof pad. "Home, direct, engage autopilot" he said.

"\_Home, acknowledged\_" the computer replied. A moment later, the craft spun slowly in place and accelerated back the way he'd come, climbing to one of the normal low-altitude traffic lanes.

The bright, clear day and smoothness of the flight quickly eased Sam's innards, though he was no less worried about where Gerry had gotten to and under what conditions. It would have been worse if he hadn't known Gerry was more than capable of taking care of himself, thanks to having black belts in Aikido and Tae Kwon Do. \_If he went, he went voluntarily\_ he mused.

Sam's attention turned to the cellphone Jarod had left with him. He pulled it out of his pocket and flipped it open. The signal indicator showed a solid five bars; no surprise considering his altitude and proximity to the city. He moved his thumb over the dial pad, stopping over the '4' key as Jarod's words came back to him: \_"You can walk away, have another decade or so of great service, and retire in comfort on your pension. End of story."\_

Whatever was going on, Sam was smart enough to know he could be going up against UNEC High Command if he did anything other than 'walk away.' \_There'll be hell to pay if they find out\_ he thought, uneasily. And, based on what he'd experienced the past week or so, he had no doubt they \_would\_ find out. \_Dishonorable discharge would

probably be the least of my worries\_ he mused. \_The penalties for unauthorized access to classified data...\_

Something else Jarod had said echoed in his mind: \_"Seems to me someone else, much higher up than either of us, has already committed a court-martial offense by screwing with your head."\_

How could he, in good conscience, continue to serve with an organization which was clearly willing to go to such lengths as an illegal memory wipe?

The thought lit a core of sullen anger in Sam's guts. Something he valued, something deeply personal, belonging to him alone, had been ripped away without his knowledge or consent! Every day, more fragments were coming back to him, but they remained just that; fragments.

His jaw tightened decisively. His thumb descended to the dial pad, quickly entering 4242 and pressing 'Send.' There was a long pause, long enough to make him wonder if he'd lost the signal, but a quick glance at the meter still showed five bars.

Suddenly, the earpiece emitted a fast series of melodic tones. There came another couple of clunks, followed by the harshest ringing tone Sam had ever heard. It was more like an atonal buzz than the smooth trill he'd expected. The cadence was also markedly different from what he was used to. Rather than the pair of half-second bursts, with two seconds between them, this one was two seconds on and four off. \_I think I know where this call ended up...\_

His theory was confirmed after the third ring. A male voice, alto, with a clear American accent, asked "Who referred you?"

"Jarod Lee" Sam replied, automatically.

"And you are?"

"Doctor Sam Shay, UNEC Ranger Service."

Another pause, during which Sam heard fragments of a low-voiced conversation in the background. He couldn't make out more than a word or two, but the other voice was male and mid-tenor. After a moment, the original voice spoke up again. "OK. We may be able to help. Do you have any vacation leave available?"

Sam blinked. "Yes, quite a bit."

"Good. Put in for two weeks right away. Next, call your AMC liaison and get a seat on cargo flight... yeah, here it is. REACH 788, departing RAF Mildenhall this Monday at 1430 your time. It'll take you straight to Moffett Field, touching down around 1230 PDT Monday.

"Take a cab to Clarke's Charcoal Broiler â€" It's a burger place on West El Camino, town called Mountain View, less than two miles from the airbase. Anyone in the area should know it. Be there by 1300 local. Got all that?"

"Yes" Sam said, scribbling furiously on his notepad. "What then?"

"'What then?'" the voice echoed, sounding surprised. "Order lunch, of course! Personally, I recommend the ground turkey burger with black pepper and fresh mushroomsâ€œ"

Exaggerated gagging noises suddenly rose in the background, followed by the tenor voice complaining "He'll ruin it!" Alto came back on with a sigh. "Sorry about that. Just 'cause my partner can't stand nice, healthy MUSHrooms!"

More gagging ensued. Alto said "Relax, eat, don't worry. We'll find you. Oh! One other thing. Bring the items your friend recovered for you. We can't help you without 'em!"

Before Sam could say another word, the call disconnected. After another few seconds, the phone's screen blanked and lit back up with `HARDWARE ERROR 0F00 EEEE`. Not all the button-pushing Sam tried brought any further response out of it.

He tossed the useless device onto the passenger seat and stared out the windshield. As little as a month ago, he would have considered such vague instructions, from an as-yet-unidentified source, to be the ravings of a full-moon special at best or a first-class prank at worst.

Now... He reached for the communication controls built into his car's center console and entered a code he knew like the back of his hand. Moments later, the image of a slender youth in the dark blue uniform of a USAF Airman flickered into being. "Air Mobility Command Operations, Mildenhall, Airman Doherty, this is not a secure line."

"No security needed on this one" Sam replied, firmly. "Doctor Sam Shay, UNEC Ranger Service, Badge AL-19. I'm going on a couple of weeks leave, and I'm hoping you can help me with a seat on one of your cargo flights to the States..."

\* \* \*

><p>One nine-hour flight and ten-minute ground car ride later, Sam found himself deposited on the corner of West El Camino and Lane Avenue, Mountain View, California. In sharp contrast to the cool dryness of northern Ireland, the day was warm and definitely on the humid side. He'd already shed his jacket, and was beginning to regret not having worn shorts. He had a sudden urge to look up at the hazy blue sky, but all he saw was thin high cirrus.<p>

Long hours in the air had left him more than a little fuzzy in the head, despite the nap he'd gotten in one of the cargo hauler's crew bunks. Oh, the bunk itself had been comfortable enough; long-haul military aircraft had evolved, significantly, in terms of crew accommodations.

No, the problem was his dreams. They were getting more vivid and repetitive. He was also finding them easier to remember, especially the one he'd had shortly before landing at Moffett.

At first, it felt like he'd been fully awake. He'd been seated comfortably in his assigned spot, gazing out the window, thinking she's running late. The fact he couldn't put a name to who 'she'



was hadn't bothered him at all.

As if on cue, an elegant black leathery-winged shape was suddenly alongside the cargo ship, opaline eyes meeting Sam's with a look combining welcome and gentle humor. A maddeningly familiar female voice had spoken in his head: \_You will find me again\_ it said. \_You are well on your way already.\_

Somehow, Sam started to drift right through the hull to join her. Before he got more than his upper body through, though, a firm hand gripped his shoulder and pulled him back in. He'd snapped violently awake to find the cargo ship's captain, hand on his shoulder, shaking him and asking if he were all right. "It looked like you were trying to climb through the window, sir" he'd said. "Good thing these don't open."

Sam had made some excuse about bad dreams, then gotten a cup of coffee. Twenty minutes later, the craft had landed near the enormous 'Hangar One' at Moffett, now refurbished into an operations center and flight museum. The original structure, built over 150 years ago in 1933 and covering eighty acres by itself, had originally housed dirigibles, including the famous (if short-lived) USS \_Macon.\_

He had spared no time for sight-seeing, though. Despite the flight-lag, he found he was positively ravenous. The scents of cooking meat and spices, now emanating from the low building in front of him, caused a minor earthquake in his stomach.

As he stepped inside, he was struck by how much the place reminded him of his brother's pub, in spirit if not size. The interior was warmly lit, despite the vaulted roof, thanks to a well-placed combination of skylights and LED floodlights. The furnishings were all well-polished wood, the only exceptions being the waterproof plasfoam chairs in the outdoor eating area. An enormous condiment bar decorated the back wall, its assorted vegetables and spreads making it look like a Farmer's Market condensed into a single table.

The clientele were as varied and complex as the massive hand-painted menus, suspended from the ceiling beams behind the rough-hewn wood counter. Sam spotted patrons from nine to ninety, both solo and in groups, their clothes ranging from shorts and T-shirts to expensive business suits.

A female tenor voice startled him out of his reverie. "Excuse me, are you in line?" He turned to see an auburn-haired lady, dressed in black sequined shorts and a matching halter top, with a silver-and-amethyst sunburst pendant around her neck. "Ah... yes, I was, thanks for asking" he replied, trying not to stare at the lady's blood-red lipstick and shiny black leather half-calf boots.

He hastily got into position in the ordering line, somewhat embarrassed about being caught gawking like a tourist. \_This is California\_ he reminded himself. \_Let nothing surprise you!\_

The service was as fast as the prices were high, but he quickly discovered the quality and size of the meal more than made up for it. He settled down at a rear table, facing the entrance, poking through a discarded hardcopy of the San Jose Mercury News. He sipped appreciatively at his drink, a local micro-brew called 'OTIS.' His turkey burger was, literally, too big to comfortably hold, so he

settled for taking slices out of it with knife and fork. The mushrooms were, indeed, fresh, almost enough to crunch.

The paper didn't hold his interest for long, mainly due to the snatches of conversation going on around him. It seemed as though no topic was off-limits.

"...drove by the first time, it said something about construction. When I went back the other way, later on, it was warning about Nazi Zombies..."

"...chased that dumb cat straight under a car, landed on a light pole, and I swear he started cackling..."

"...snuck up behind them, then yelled QUACK! At the top of your lungs? I had no idea ducks could get off the ground that fast...!"

"...trans-dimensional. Frell, it makes more sense than FTL travel! Why bother trying to get around relativity when you can just slip through the gaps..."

"...haven't lived until you've had an out-of-control school bus rolling down the hill towards you from the rear, and a pole transformer shooting sparks in front of you..."

"...just the way they are. To a male dolphin, hooking your knee with their schlong is their equivalent of a hearty handshake. You either get used to it or find a different career..."

This last comment hit just as Sam was taking a swallow. He choked, sending droplets spraying over the table, caught between disbelief and laughing out loud. Though not an aquatic specialist, he'd served two years as assistant to the chief vet at one of the human-dolphin joint research stations in the Sea of Japan early in his career. He'd learned (and seen) enough about cetacean sexual antics to make Hugh Hefner III blush..

Suddenly anxious for a distraction, he looked at his watch: 1310. He looked around, his gaze lingering on the entrance, but no one was coming in and there was no movement in the parking lot. He frowned, wondering if the embroidered UNEC insignia on his polo shirt was enough of a hint to whoever was looking for him, then wondering if he'd been 'pranked' after all.

The thought was put abruptly to rest as a half-familiar male alto spoke up from next to his table. "Sam? Sam Shay? Holy crap, is it really you?!"

He turned to see a stocky figure, slightly under two meters tall, with curly black hair just starting to go silver at the temples. The round face, though, looked anything but old enough to be growing silver.

Eyes as golden-brown and piercing as a red-tail hawk twinkled mischievously behind aviator-style prescription lenses, laughter lines showing at the corners. He was clad in dark blue cargo shorts, all-terrain sandals, and a black T-shirt bearing the legend 'It Is Now Safe To Turn Off Your Computer.' Belatedly, Sam recognized his voice as the one who'd been describing yelling at ducks. "Yes, it's

me" he replied, puzzled. "Do we know each other?"

The man rolled his eyes, and traded a look with his companion. "'Do we know each other,' he says. So much for eidetic memory!"

The other man was just as tall, but skinny as a wire with sandy brown hair and a prominent moustache. He also wore glasses and, despite the warm day, was dressed in faded blue jeans and sneakers, topped with an electric-blue polo shirt embroidered with TESLA'S BASEMENT - STAFF in sun-yellow letters near the breast pocket. He grinned, and said "Maybe his internal coin cell is dead?"

The two chuckled. Sam, having no idea what a 'coin cell' was, didn't know whether to join them or be offended. He settled for a puzzled smile as the stocky man extended a hand. "Bryan Lind, Stanford double-E class of 2072! You sat right next to Jarod, if I recall correctly." As he said this, with just the slightest emphasis on the name 'Jarod,' one eye closed in a fast wink. "This is my partner in business and mischief alike, John Landon."

As little as three days ago, Sam wouldn't have had a clue what to say. Now, between the wink and mention of a familiar name, he slid smoothly into the expected role even though this was the first time he'd been to California. "Of course! Now I remember. Good to see you, Bryan, and nice to meet you, John. Saint Blaise Above, how long has it been?"

The pair sat down, and all three of them were soon trading catch-up stories like any trio of college survivors separated by time and circumstance. Only someone who knew all three men well would have known much of it was made up on the fly.

After a few minutes of small talk, Bryan spoke up. "So, do you have a place to stay? And please don't say the base hostel. It may be no credit out of your account, but the old saying 'You Gets What You Pays For' is just as true today as it was at the Dawn of Time."

Sam blinked. "Actually, yes, I was thinking about it. Do you have a better offer, then?"

Bryan manufactured a very good 'hurt' look. "Sam! What kind of friend would I be if I didn't offer you a crash spot? One condition: Trust us! You'll like it when you see it. OK?"

Despite the determination which had brought him here and the role he'd started to play, Sam was a bit startled. They'd barely gotten to know each other and he was already being offered a place to stay? He eyed the pair closely, trying to use the same sense he used with animals.

Both returned his gaze unflinchingly. Bryan, under the devil-may-care fun-loving exterior, was a keen observer. Sam got the impression he could tuck himself into a corner of any gathering and virtually 'disappear' to the rest of the room, all the while keeping careful track of what was going on. The half-smirk he seemed to favor as his normal expression cast an air of mischief and mystery, while inviting the watcher to investigate further â€" if they dared! \_A warning\_ Sam decided\_. Don't approach unless you're ready to have your most basic beliefs questioned before you realize it!\_

John Landon, though clearly the quieter of the pair, gave an impression of a sly sense of humor, along with the same ability to notice \_every\_ thing if he so chose. There was also a sense of nervous energy, tightly leashed but ready to spring loose at a moment's notice. \_Workaholic. Someone who could pull an all-nighter on a project at the drop of a hat\_ Sam mused\_. I'll bet he hasn't taken a real vacation in over a year!\_

They made a comfortable match. He could easily see how one would complement the other. One thing both men shared, all but hardwired into the way they carried themselves, was that indefinable and subtle sense of being 'animal people.' Sam would have wagered any amount they'd both done quite a bit of hands-on work with exotics and domestics alike.

Perhaps it was that sense which decided him. He wasn't entirely sure. What he was sure of was he wanted answers! Jarod had referred him to this pair, with confidence they could provide them. How they could possibly do so, half a world away from Scotland, Sam had no idea. But even if the trip turned out to be a wild goose chase, there was something utterly carefree about the pair which was irresistible to his curiosity.

He nodded, and stood up. "When do we leave?"

The trip was short, taking place in an older-style ground car which Bryan identified as a 'minivan.' It was clearly an aftermarket conversion from internal combustion, having been retrofitted with a solar-electric drive system, but it was quick and comfortable nonetheless.

"Did the conversion myself" Bryan explained, an unmistakable hint of pride in his tone. "Wasn't hard at all, really. The tough part was getting our local Motor Vehicle department to sign off on it as roadworthy.

"No matter, though. The few mistakes I made turned into free education."

Sam raised his eyebrows in surprise. Few people these days bothered to learn more about their vehicles than was necessary to drive or pilot them. Intrigued, he took a more detailed look at the van's interior.

Though he was certainly no electronics whiz, he soon saw there was something decidedly odd about the array of extra equipment, most of which took up an enclosed metal frame dividing the front seats. None of it looked like it had ever been a factory option.

Belatedly, he realized the numerous antennas on the van's roof, coupled with the safety light bar across the rear of its roof rack, should have been more than a clue. The installation had looked so well done he'd simply guessed it was a professional job.

Now he wasn't so sure. Here were a pair of control modules for types of communication radios Motorola hadn't made for at least fifteen years, their displays showing a different but cryptic series of characters. Below them, facing straight up from inside the metal frame... Saint Blaise Above, was that an audio control panel from an old Boeing jet?!

Poking up above the top center of the dashboard was a 32-centimeter computer touch-screen, blank and idle at the moment. It was only then Sam noticed Bryan was wearing an early 21st-century telephone operator's headset, connected to a coil-cord which disappeared into the shadows by his right leg. A rounded boxy shape, clearly part of the headset cable, was attached to his seat belt at chest level, sporting a large white button which could only be push-to-talk. \_No voice-activated transmit?\_

But the van's main instrument panel and driver controls were clearly of contemporary design, barely three years old if Sam was any judge, right down to the small status and traffic-alert display required on any powered vehicle operated on public roads or in civilian airspace. He tried to imagine what kind of personality could possibly be happy with such a strange combination of up-to-date and antique, let alone convince them to work together, and failed utterly.

He glanced outside. The van was moving swiftly along a tree-lined street with industrial parks on one side and a fenced-off line of evergreen trees on the other. It slowed, suddenly, turned right into a wide driveway and rolled slowly into a parking space bearing a battered yellow sign at its front, with bold black lettering reading DON'T EVEN THINK IT!

"All out!" John said, airily, as he hopped out and opened the side door for Sam. "Welcome to the asylum."

Sam chuckled politely as he stepped out â€" then froze in amazement, mouth half-open. They were in front of a huge white-painted warehouse, sporting multiple loading ramps and roll-up doors. A second story was visible, though smaller than the main building, communications antennae of nearly every imaginable size and type decorating its roof like a metallic jungle.

One of the roll-up doors at ground level was open, with classic rock music pouring out. Visible through the opening was the most amazing assortment of electronic and techno-junk Sam had ever seen in one place. Most of it was as alien to him as the backside of Mars, but he recognized ancient computers (were those really electromechanical \_disk drives?!\_), test and measurement equipment, piles of assorted circuit boards and modules and a thousand other things he didn't think he could identify if his life depended on it.

A small horde of people, ranging from teens to seniors, were swarming over and around the piles; disassembling, assembling, testing, loading and unloading roller-carts, haggling over this or that detail, laughing, cursing and generally creating their own version of Chaos Incarnate. \_A hive of honeybees in full production would be placid next to this\_ Sam thought, bemused.

Reflected sunlight caught his eye. He looked up and saw a huge sign secured to the side of the building, reading TESLA'S BASEMENT in sun-yellow letters against a glossy blue background. At either end of the sign, neon tubes in the shape of stylized lightning bolts flickered bright blue at odd intervals, supposedly radiating from the output spheres of Tesla coils painted at the sign's edges.

"Criminys, John, you'd think the man had never seen a surplus store"

Bryan's voice said from behind him.

John sighed. "Poor, depravâ€" uhh, 'deprived' person. Shall we correct that unfortunate condition?"

Sam turned at this and eyed them both suspiciously. "Why am I deprived simply because I've never seen a place like this? I'm a doctor, not an engineer!"

"Why not be both?" Bryan said, airily, waving towards the building. "You'd be surprised how much you can learn with very little effort. C'mon... We'll show you. John, grab his bag, will you?"

Landon snorted and looked indignant. "What, now I'm a butler?"

"A most technically-astute butler" Bryan shot back, without missing a beat.

"Oh! Well, in that case..."

He scooped up Sam's travel bag and followed them inside. Bryan led the way, threading easily through the crowd and exchanging greetings with several of them on the way. Sam followed, acutely conscious of numerous pairs of eyes on him, wearing expressions varying from mild curiosity to suspicion. He kept walking, eyes front, trying to ignore the stares.

It got easier as they approached a swinging double-door marked LABS, mainly because the vet found himself distracted by the most lifelike statue of a caracal he'd ever seen. Easily a meter and a half long, from nose to the end of its well-furred tail, it crouched sphinx-like atop a somewhat tacky-looking faux Greek column to the right of the doors, contemplating the activity through slitted eyelids.

Just before Bryan reached the doors, he stopped, looked up at the statue, and produced an amazingly bird-like whistle. Sam's eyes widened as the lithe feline form twitched black-tufted ears, opened yellow-green eyes full of life and alert energy, and leaped down from the column in one graceful bound. "Don't move" Bryan said, calmly. "He won't hurt you. Let him check you out."

The vet was too startled to do otherwise. The caracal padded silently over to him and locked gazes. Sam felt those eyes almost like a physical blow, their calm regard containing far more intelligence than was typical for any member of the feline species.

"Hold out your hand" Bryan said, softly. Only then did Sam realize the entire room had gone silent. Even the background music had been muted.

Slowly, he extended his right hand, halting when it was within a few centimeters of the caracal's nose. The cat stretched forward, nostrils flaring slightly. Sam could actually feel the air move.

After a moment's consideration the cat locked gazes with him again, bobbed its head once with a soft but resonant 'maaow,' then turned neatly in place and bounded back to the column to resume its statuesque pose.

Sam jumped nearly a foot in the air as the entire room broke into applause and shouts of approval. "Congratulations" John said, raising his voice slightly to cut through the noise. "You've passed the Kenya test."

Before the vet could so much as form his next question, they were through the double doors and into a long corridor. Well-lit work rooms, both with and without windows, lined one side. Each one had at least one large workbench and anywhere from one to three equipment racks, sporting a variety of electronics Sam didn't usually see outside of Alladale's Avionics Maintenance lab.

One room featured a huge Plexalloy box on its bench, a squarish-looking electronic component with multiple colored wires suspended neatly in the middle between two heavy electrodes. A buzzing sound grew as they passed, changed to an electric snarl, and ended with a sharp BANG!

Once Sam got his heartbeat under control and blinked the spots from his eyes, he could see there was nothing left of the component but a few shreds of charred wire. Tiny silvery bits of metal decorated the interior of the clear cube in a flower-like pattern.

A brown-haired figure, dressed much like Bryan except for closed-toe sandals and a different T-shirt, leaped up from his seat and started dancing around the room, whooping with triumph.

"Gee, I think he's happy" John said, with a grin.

"Great!" Replied Bryan, eyeing the cavorting experimenter. "I was worried we might have to scare up another HiPot test stand if he was going to monopolize that one much longer."

Sam glanced between the two, his expression one huge question mark. Bryan grinned. "All will be made clear in due course" he said, mysteriously, waving them onward. They went up a set of stairs, and pushed through another double-door marked OFFICE. A smaller, hand-printed sign had been taped below it, declaring ABANDON SANITY, ALL YE WHO ENTER. Sam gulped.

He got another surprise as he passed through the doorway. Bright yellow light suddenly glowed all around him, and the sound of a cuckoo clock striking the hour filled the hallway. He froze. "What theâ€"?!"

"Oho!" John said, as he set Sam's bag down and eyed the Ranger speculatively. "He's wired."

"So I see" said Bryan, retrieving something from a shelf just inside the door. "Hold still a moment, Doctor... this won't hurt a bit."

The vet was too surprised to do anything other than comply, his mind in a whirl. \_Wired?\_ \_UNEC is resorting to bugs?!

The portable scanner Bryan passed over him, in stark contrast to the antiquated tech he'd already seen, was very much up to date. It resembled one of the hand-held 'black' lights rock-hounds used when checking for ultraviolet-sensitive minerals, but the resemblance was purely physical. Sam knew it could detect and identify, precisely, a

huge variety of transmitting devices whether active or passive.

It didn't take long to find the source of the alarm. Bryan frowned slightly as he held the scanner over Sam's left shoulder blade. "You're carrying a TLC chip. I thought UNEC only tagged animals with those?"

"Non-humans" John corrected, coming over to eye the readout for himself. "Remember, we're animals as well. A species of great ape, according to Desmond Morris. Give me a moment."

He ducked inside and out of sight. Sam heard harsh clicking noises, like a cacophony of relays gone mad. "No problem" came John's voice a moment later. "The chip's not active. Can't find its serial number in any of the databases."

Bryan nodded and shut down the scanner. He eyed Sam with a mix of speculation and suspicion for a moment, then called out "Computer, bug-alert reset." The yellow light went out, and the cuckoo cut itself off in mid-cu. He gestured inside with his free hand. "No worries. Even if your chip were active, there aren't any relay points in range thanks to this being a developed area."

Sam returned the look, unflinchingly. "I would love to know how you got access to the TLC database" he said, then moved into the room.

From all he'd seen below, he'd expected a dimly-lit cave-like environment, liberally decorated with bizarre artwork and more examples of techno-flotsam. What he got was a neat warmly-lit space, occupied by two low-height cubicle workstations against the far wall. A wide picture window supplied a clear view of the parking lot below, along with a good chunk of the surrounding city and golden-green rolling hills to the east and south.

Unlike most of the offices he'd visited, this one had a hard floor in the form of white tile with green accents. There were a few throw-rugs, mostly in front of the various bean-bag chairs scattered around the middle of the room and in front of two small sofas facing each other across a glass-topped coffee table. Adding to the air of 'Huh?' each one featured a different motif from various First Nation tribes.

Shelves lined half the wall space, crammed with all manner of equipment manuals, textbooks, and device databooks from various component manufacturers. Above one of the shelves, hung in an electric-blue frame, was a full-size portrait in black-and-white of a narrow-faced man with a prominent mustache and piercing black eyes. The figure wore just the slightest hint of a knowing smirk, as if daring the viewer to inquire further.

Sam didn't need to. Despite his limited technical background, he knew Nikola Tesla's visage as well as anyone. Who wouldn't know of the eccentric genius responsible for developing the principles of the Tesla-Queller field generator, not to mention forming the basis for power distribution systems all over the world?

In another corner, a glass display case held a wide assortment of antique electronic knick-knacks; weirdly-shaped vacuum tubes, a ferrite-core memory plane, prototype disk drives, discrete



transistors and an assortment of other components unknown to him. "Pull up your choice of seat" John said, as he plopped Sam's bag down near the end of one of the shelves. "I imagine you're just bursting with questions."

"That'd get messy" Bryan commented, as he sat down at one of the workstations and accessed his computer. "All those question marks and exclamation points rolling around the floor... who's going to sweep them all up?"

"That's what the Roomba's for" John replied, as he settled into the other workstation and started his own message check. "Gotta give that noisy little sucker something to do..."

Bryan winced, and launched a Nerf ball at his friend across the cubie's low divider. "I'll get you for that later" he muttered, darkly, then turned to Sam with a grin. The vet had parked himself on one of the sofas. "So, Doctor Shay... Care for a drink or snack, or would you like to tell us what's brought you here?"

Sam blinked. "I'm fine, thanks. Still burning off that burger" he said, still half-convinced he'd dropped into an asylum for rehabilitating mad scientists.

The sound of something soft brushing against something hard was all the warning he had before a tawny-gold shape sailed over the top of the couch and landed right next to him. He turned, startled, and found himself gazing straight into the yellow-green eyes of the caracal. A stray memory bubbled up in Sam's consciousness; he'd seen eyes that color before, he was sure of it!

Before he could remember where, the cat leaped off the couch and padded across the room to sit down next to Bryan's chair, tail curled neatly around his front paws. Bryan grinned as he reached down to stroke the slender head. A deeply resonant purr sounded a few moments later. "No worries" Bryan told the still-startled vet. "You just happened to be sitting in one of his favorite spots."

"What I find amazing is he didn't make any kind of objection. In fact, I'm really surprised he came up. He doesn't usually leave his column for more than a few minutes. You must have quite the way with animals."

"I could say the same for you!" The vet said, confusion evident on his face. "I've not seen anything bigger than desert lynxes kept as pets, certainly not wild cats like caracals!"

"Not as wild as you may think" John said, leaning around his screen to watch what was happening. "Caracals are actually one of the easiest cats to tame. They've been used for centuries as hunting companions in the Middle East and Africa. They're often mistaken for lynxes, but they're more closely related to servals."

The caracal, apparently satisfied with having been duly recognized and fussed over, padded over to a platform by the window, leaped up on it without any apparent effort, and settled down full-length to watch the world. Bryan gestured at him.

"Kenya, there, came from the Middle East. We did some contract work a few years ago for, of all people, a rather highly-placed Saudi

prince. A couple of months after the job, we received this terminally-cute kitten who clearly had to grow into his ears and paws. I can assure you, he wasn't always this graceful!"

Sam had to smile at that. Young cats, as a species, all seemed to go through a phase where they were as likely to trip over their own feet as they were to chase their tail. "But the permitsâ€" he started to say.

"â€"were made a lot easier by the fact Kenya was a gift from royalty, royalty who our government is very interested in maintaining good relations with. Refusing to take Kenya would have been... mmm... uncomfortable? In the diplomatic sense, of course."

"Considering their status in the Middle East, and the fact the species is hardly endangered, our Fish & Wildlife service felt it was best to just stay out of the way" John said, reaching over to stroke the cat himself. Kenya acknowledged the gesture with a brief increase in his purring, but didn't take his eyes off the activity below. "Bryan's got a couple of acres worth of property, so it wasn't hard to put up a good run-wild enclosure."

"Sure keeps the local rodent population under control" Bryan added, appreciatively. Sam suddenly understood the source of the faint animal scent he'd detected in the van, as well as the reason for the half-size beanbag chair behind the last of the rear seats. "Any other questions?" Bryan said, one eyebrow raised.

"Well... yes" Sam replied. "No offense, but how in blazes did you get access to a federal database?!"

Bryan looked puzzled for a moment. "TLC chip lookup, Information Access Act" John prompted. "Different laws in the EU?"

"Ah, right!" Bryan said. "Well, Doctor Shay, I don't know how your division of UNEC handles such things, but here in the States TLC entries are a matter of public record. You didn't know this? It's a huge help for farmers. They can tell at a glance if any predators make it onto their lands, and where."

"Public record? No, I had no idea" Sam replied, a little disturbed at the concept.

Bryan nodded. "The bigger question is why you'd be carrying one of the things. They're utterly useless for spying, because they have no audio or visual pickup. All they do is relay vital signs and location. Even that requires they be calibrated for the normal life signs of whatever critter you're giving one to, so the processor knows when everything's OK and when to scream for help."

"If your bosses wanted to track you" John continued, over steepled fingers. "They wouldn't waste a TLC implant. Especially one which has its configuration memory as blank as a new sheet of paper."

Sam looked, if possible, even more puzzled. Then he looked relieved. "That means the chip wouldn't even transmit its location" he said. "So why is it in my shoulder?" He rubbed at the spot self-consciously.

Bryan shrugged. "A mystery for later. For now, would you like to tell

us what convinced Jarod to send you our way? Or would you like me to start?"

"You first, please" Sam replied, greatly relieved.

The relief was not lost on his hosts. They exchanged knowing grins, then Bryan began. "Tesla's Basement started about eighty years ago as just a simple electronic surplus store and recycling depot. Incoming equipment which was thought to be still usable was checked for basic operation and set out in the store or online for sale to whoever might want it.

"Equipment which was dangerous in some way, or which was required under contract to be demilitarized or disassembled, went through a process to separate the dangerous materials and get them into a licensed HazMat recycle-and-dispose site. Whatever was left was sold as parts, assuming our contract with the original owner allowed it, or sent out for scrap if not.

"John and I were regular customers of the place for the last couple of decades. We got to know the owners, and we often traded our expertise in checking things out for discounts on equipment we wanted. After a couple of years of this, the original owners set us up with workspace in a couple of unused rooms. I think we've both lost count of how many weekends we spent here, helping the regular staff go through the stuff."

John spoke up "Five years ago, the original owners decided to retire. They offered us a terrific deal on the place, on the condition we do everything we could to keep it going. The timing was right, so we said 'Yes.'

"What we've set up downstairs is a bunch of working electronic shops, or labs. They're all set up in a similar way, in terms of basic measuring equipment â€" hand tools, multimeter, oscilloscope, power supply, signal generator, computer and network link, etcetera â€" but each lab also has a specialty." He grinned again, widely. "The one which startled you is dedicated to HiPot, or High Potential breakdown testing. It's a destructive test which can help you determine the limits of different electrical insulations."

"The happy type you saw" Bryan continued, "is one of our many customers, name of Leo if I recall correctly. He's working on some kind of new super-lightweight coating which, supposedly, can stop power lines from attracting lightning. I'm not sure what we walked in on today, but it certainly looked successful.

"Anyway, shortly after we took over the place, we set up a ham radio club along with the labs. All those facilities are available on a paid membership basis to anyone who wants to play with electricity but either can't afford, or doesn't have space for, equipment of their own. Between that and the sales from the store, we do pretty well. The inventors are free to develop their discoveries any way they please, in exchange for a small percentage of any actual profits they make."

John gestured expansively. "Latest is not always greatest. We've always believed the best possible progress comes from learning \_and remembering\_ the lessons of the past and mixing them with the techniques and technology the future can bring.

"We help to keep otherwise-usable stuff out of the landfills, and we also work with the local school districts to give basic courses in electronics to anyone who wants to learn."

"There is only one firm rule" Bryan added, nodding towards the caracal. "Anyone who wants to gain membership to use the labs, or the radio club, has to pass the 'Kenya Test.' That's what you went through just a few minutes ago."

"I thought it was some kind of test" Sam said. "You said I passed?"

"You wouldn't be sitting here right now if you hadn't" John said. He jerked a thumb in Kenya's direction. "Our resident furball is very perceptive when it comes to people. The majority come through without a problem. Every so often, though..." He shrugged. "If Kenya had hissed at you instead of meowing like he did, you'd already be back at Moffett Field."

"Then again" Bryan added, as he reclined in his chair, "You're not the first person Jarod has sent our way. Kenya has yet to reject anyone he's referred."

Despite the explanation, Sam was still puzzled. "OK" he said, slowly. "You've obviously got quite a setup here, but none of what you've told me explains why Jarod thought you could help me. Are either one of you a psychologist, or neurologist?"

John squinted, and traded looks with Bryan. "I could probably spell either one, if I had to" he said.

"And we've got a pair of couches" Bryan agreed, waving at the sofas. The exasperated look on Sam's face started them both chuckling. "Neither one of us are medics" Bryan said, getting his mirth under control.

Abruptly, his face turned utterly serious. "What we are, Doctor Shay, at least according to everything we've been told, are problem-solvers and critical thinkers. Sleuths. First-class snoops. Amateur detectives. Champion-class boat-rockers, if you will. Couple those basic skills with a deep knowledge of technology and it's a combination damn few mysteries can hold out against."

"Don't get us wrong" John put in, seeing a flash of annoyance cross Sam's face. "You're also a problem-solver and critical thinker. A good one, too, or you wouldn't be a UNEC Ranger. What you lack, according to what Jarod told us, is the third part of the triangle: Skill with technology."

"But I use technology every day!" Sam protested. "And pretty bloody well, too!"

"We're not arguing that much" Bryan said, holding up one hand. "We're talking about understanding the guts of what you're using, enough to spot pitfalls, booby traps, or see when you're being deliberately misdirected. For example, did you know it's possible to turn any common smart-phone into a very effective audio and video surveillance device?"

"Did you also know" John put in, "that a shotgun microphone and most other types of covert audio surveillance can be defeated by a simple white-noise generator? Frell, a boom-box tuned to the local rock station does just as well."

Sam started to reply, then faltered. He blushed slightly. "Not the slightest idea" he muttered.

"Ignorance is nothing to be ashamed of" Bryan said, softly. "It's what you choose to do in the face of it that makes the difference."

"'Knowledge is Power. With Power comes Responsibility. Responsibility is worthless without Humility'" quoted John. "Queller's Law, bless her flinty heart."

"We owe Jarod, big-time" Bryan said. "Helping you will happen, no matter what. You can, if you wish, simply take off and enjoy a couple week's vacation in the Bay Area. We can suggest some great spots to go hiking, birdwatching, hang-gliding, whatever you might want to do. We will still do our best to solve whatever mystery you've brought us, at no cost to you."

"Alternatively" added John, "you can stop letting people push you around, telling you what to remember and what to forget, and learn to take control of your own life. Which will it be?"

There wasn't the slightest hint of hesitation in Sam's movements as, for answer, he drew his bag to him and pulled out a small bright-yellow Pelican case. He handed it to Bryan, who snapped it open and examined the contents with considerable interest. Bryan handed the half-melted memory card to John, then examined the tube of multicolored flecks. Finally, he flipped through the notebook with obvious interest, his eyebrows going up ever higher as he got to the descriptions of the dragons.

"That's everything I have so far" Sam said, firmly. "And I can say, with confidence, someone has taken a pickaxe to my memory. If you two can help me find out what really happened, I will cheerfully sit through whatever you want to teach me!"

## 12. Chapter 12

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 12\*\***

"\_And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic nor popular - but one must take it because it is right."\_

(David Levithan, 'Wide Awake')

There were times, much later in his life, when Sam found himself amazed at the assumptions he'd made about the learning program at Tesla's Basement. At first, he thought it would be just like college; lectures followed by lab time, lather, rinse, repeat.

He quickly found the staff considered them one and the same. Lab time

was mixed with impromptu lectures, often sparked by someone's success or (in some cases, spectacular) failure with a given exercise.

Nor was there any guarantee a lecture period would be all lecture. More often than not, there would be a demonstration of hardware or software which, despite its age or claimed state of obsolescence by the world at large, accomplished the task at least as well as (and sometimes, better than) modern equipment. At other times, the subject of the lecture or lab would switch abruptly in mid-stream.

This tactic nearly drove him to distraction at first. He didn't realize until much later it had a very specific purpose: To encourage multi-tasking.

For the first few days he tended to keep to himself, observing more than participating. This was a consequence of two factors. One, he couldn't shake the feeling of being out of place among the crowd, most of whom were barely half his age.

The second was a startling discovery he made about himself. Though he was comfortable using nearly any kind of technology, he found he had always been somewhat fearful of working 'under the hood,' as it were. UNEC taught all its Rangers to do basic maintenance checks on their aircars, but those checks were designed to be simple enough for anyone.

Once he realized this, much of the fear vanished and he found it easier to follow the ways of electrons. Some doubts remained, though. He felt comfortable enough, on the evening of his fourth day, to mention them to Bryan and John during what had become a nightly get-together.

"It's like with the old internal-combustion cars" Bryan said, after Sam explained his troubles. "Plenty of people could check their oil or coolant level, or do simple things like replace a radiator cap or light bulbs."

"But the minute you presented them with something they felt was more 'complicated,' even something as simple as actually changing their engine's oil" John continued, "It'd be a case of immediate panic and off to the mechanic."

Sam sighed, and nodded uncomfortably. "Every time I'm poking around in something electronic, even with a multimeter, I feel like I have to get everything exactly right the first time, or I'm going to blow something expensive halfway down the block. I'm constantly second-guessing myself, even after one of the instructors has given their blessing."

"I think I see where the issue is" Bryan said, after a moment's thought. "In veterinary work, an animal's life depends on what you decide to do. Mistakes can be lethal, just as in human medicine."

"I think you're trying to apply your veterinary instincts to electronics work. It's good you're being cautious, but there is such a thing as being too cautious and it's holding you back. Don't worry if your probe slips, or you hook up something backwards! There isn't a techie alive who hasn't made a destructive error, usually more than one."

"Putting it more simply" said John, "there are exactly two kinds of techs in the world: Those who have blown something up and those who will blow something up. It's as unavoidable as breathing. Bryan and I have had it happen plenty of times. Doesn't matter if you have three days or three decades of experience. You never get completely immune."

"What's important" Bryan continued, "is what you learn from the experience. Electronics aren't alive, advances in AI notwithstandingâ€"

"Artificial Insemination?" piped up John, with a grin. He ducked, laughing, as Bryan chucked an oversize Nerf brick at him. The brick overshot and bounced off Kenya's rump where the caracal was stretched out on his shelf, star-gazing. Apparently used to such shenanigans, the cat's only reaction was to give all three humans a look he normally reserved for small, annoying prey.

"See what you've done?" Bryan said, disgustedly. "Go apologize to the nice caracal."

"You threw the brick!"

"Yes, and you had the unmitigated gall to duck, knowing full well Kenya was right behind you. Now go apologize, before he decides your leg would make a good scratching post."

John rolled his eyes skyward and turned his chair around to face the ruffled cat. "Sorry, bud" he said, softly, smoothing the fur where the brick had struck. Then, in a loud whisper, he said "Bryan made me do it!"

Yellow-green eyes held John's for a moment. Then the cat gave a disgusted-sounding chuff, got up and stretched. Sam raised an eyebrow at the sound of vertebrae popping softly into place.

Seconds later, both his eyebrows shot skyward as Kenya leaped down from the shelf, loped easily across the room â€" and settled right next to him on the beanbag chair, using the vet's side as a pillow. "Whoa" he whispered, as he ran a tentative hand along the cat's side. A deep purr filled the room.

"That's a first" John said, eyeing the scene with considerable surprise.

"You're not kidding" Bryan added, equally amazed. Sam looked up, his expression one big question mark. "Kenya normally takes at least a week to warm up to anyone new, and at least two before he'll even consider sharing parking space with them" Bryan explained. "And he's taken to you after just four days?!\_

Sam didn't reply right away. Kenya had tilted his head upward to meet the vet's gaze. Gorgeous eyes Sam thought. Just like Toothlessâ€"

He froze, a chill wending its way down his spine as the name associated itself with an image: A black reptilian face, finely scaled to the texture of soft leather, with piercing yellow-green eyes, floated up from the depths of his fragmented memory. It was quickly joined by another, identical except for storm-gray eyes in

which rainbow flecks danced. For the first time since he'd realized something was wrong, a name appeared to go with the face:

\_Skye.\_

"Sam? Are you OK?"

He blinked, startled. The images vanished and he growled in frustration. Kenya tensed at the sound, eyeing him quizzically. A single word popped into Sam's head: \_Angry?\_

The frustration cooled immediately. "Not with you, Kenya... relax, it's nothing to do with you at all" he said, petting the caracal's silky fur. Reassured, the cat relaxed and started purring again.

"Sam?" Bryan repeated. "What's up?"

"Another memory fragment" the vet said, describing what he'd experienced. "Damn, I feel like I'm so \_close,\_ and then it's gone again!"

The phone on John's desk beeped twice, then a soft female voice said \_"John? Are you available?"\_

"Sure am, Nancy" he called back. "What's up?"

"\_I've rebuilt the memory card you brought down" \_she said. Then her voice went very soft indeed. \_"I really think you'd better take a look at this..."\_

John frowned slightly, then said "On my way" and headed for the door, the words "Back in a few" floating in his wake.

Sam's pulse quickened. "Was that the memory card I gave you?"

Bryan nodded. "Nancy Chen is the best microelectronic forensics tech we've come across. Her initial report said it was just the interface circuits on the card which were fried. She was going to transfer the chip itself to a new interface so we could try reading it. Here."

He held out a steaming mug, smelling strongly of peppermint. Sam accepted the tea, gratefully. Even the aroma was enough to start calming the crop of butterflies which had, apparently, taken up residence somewhere near his spleen.

John was back a few minutes later, waving a small ESD shielding bag. His face was flushed with excitement. "Jackpot!" he said as he dropped into his chair, pulled the bag open and slid the restored card into his computer's reader.

Bryan snorted. "Gee, try being more cryptic," he said, as he got up and came around to John's side of the workstation. He studied the screen for a moment, then continued. "You been sniffing Rubber Re-Nu again? How is a bunch of what look like standard UNEC field photos a 'jackpot?' I mean, yeah, the wolf pups are cute, butâ€"

John grinned, smugly, and pressed another key. Bryan's eyes bugged, his jaw dropped, and his face went two shades paler. "Holy...



Frelling... Cow!"

This was more than Sam could take. He extricated himself from the beanbag, much to Kenya's annoyance, and came over to join the other two. "What's so startling about wolf cuâ€œ"

The subject of the image was as far removed from wolves as fish were from birds. Sam blinked as he recognized himself, in his uniform jumpsuit, standing in front of his old aircar, right next toâ€œ"

His own jaw followed Bryan's. Sitting to Sam's right was a lean, black reptilian shape, longer from nose to tail tip than he was tall, sporting rainbow-flecked gray eyes. She had one bat-like wing draped comfortably over Sam's shoulders, matching the arm he'd wrapped partway around her neck (and how he knew he was looking at a female was an utter mystery).

The shot looked like it had been taken from on top of a rise, as the tops of oddly-shaped buildings were visible in the background. Farther away, Sam thought he could make out the silvery gleam of ocean. "What else is in there?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Obligingly, John paged through the other images. There were many of what Sam now recognized as a quaint-looking village, constructed along Old Norse lines. It was a good match for the people, all of whom were clad in rough leather and hand-woven cloth and had the demeanor of those who could survive nearly anything.

Some sported helmets with, of all things, horns mounted on them. Viking culture recreation he thought. Must be some outlying community...

Even as the thought drifted across his mind, he discarded it. How he knew it was wrong, he couldn't say, but every instinct he had screamed this was something entirely different.

His eyes flickered to the last thumbnail in the row, drawn by a flash of familiar color. "Bring that one up" he said, pointing.

John did so. The photo was of two much smaller reptilian shapes, one turquoise blue with a darker stripe of azure down its back, the other green with yellow highlights on its wings. Both were, apparently, curled up in the back seat of his aircar, eyes bugging comically at the camera and tails entwined. "The blue one" he said, tapping the screen. "That's the same one I saw just a few days ago. I know it! He called himself 'Naluâ€œ'"

He stopped, suddenly aware of what he'd said. The reaction from Bryan and John, however, was anything but the laughter, derision, or questioning looks he expected. Instead, John asked, in a perfectly serious manner: "Was this verbal, or was it like a voice in your head?"

"Ah... a little of both, actually" Sam replied, startled at being taken seriously. "I heard him, in the same way you're hearing me right now, but all he did was chirp and squawk."

Encouraged by their apparent acceptance, he described the entire encounter; how he'd seemed to have gained an 'inner voice' telling

him exactly what was wrong with whatever animal he was helping and concluding with his encounter with the eagle.

"Whoof" Bryan said, leaning back against one of the bookshelves. "That's a rare gift, Sam. Cherish it!"

Much to Sam's surprise, this was the last either of them said about it. They returned their attention to the photos. "Copied toâ€" Bryan said.

"â€"secure archive. Already done" John replied. He glanced up at Sam. "Want any prints?"

"Just the one of me with the black... dragon" he replied, the last word coming reluctantly.

Bryan nodded. "'Dragon' is correct" he said. "In fact, seeing these pictures raises some new questions for us."

"How so?" Sam asked.

"Well" Bryan replied, "the basics are something you're going to get soon enough, but I'll give you a head start." He sat back down at his desk. Sam, taking the hint, picked up his tea and settled back on the beanbag chair. Kenya opened one eye, then sighed and went back to sleep.

"You don't always need direct information about something" Bryan continued, "to know it exists. For example, from what you've seen, you would be right in guessing John and I have spent a fair amount of time learning the ins and outs of exotic animals. It provides a nice counterbalance to tech work which, although fascinating and fun, can be pretty sterile."

"Personally, I keep racing pigeons" John added. "Bryan's the cat person."

"Granted" Bryan said. "Though I still like just about any critter with feathers. Did some basic falconry a few years back. Anyway, about six years ago, we both noticed some odd things about a stretch of land in northern Norway. Have a look at this."

He punched some commands into his computer. A holographic map glowed to life in the center of the room. An irregular red line lit up, surrounding a large island a few kilometers due north of Bangsund. A tiny thread of highway, marked RESTRICTED, linked the island's northwestern edge with the mainland north of Namsos. Sam recognized it immediately.

"Hard to pick a more isolated spot outside of the antarctic" he said. "That parcel doesn't even have an informal name. It's in the UNEC catalog as FWA-7G3. Fallow wilderness area, fully protected, no human presence including UNEC Rangers in or out except under specific authorization from the Norwegian government. It's their land, and they take care of it. Nothing there except plants and small critters. I could name you at least four other spots in different countries, all with the same status."

"So says the official story" Bryan said, with a sly smile. He keyed in more commands. The map zoomed out and bright yellow spots appeared

over the city of Trondheim and the town of Namsos, closest to the island. Population and other data appeared in columns next to them.

"What you're seeing is a summary of publicly-available information, mostly from the World Almanac Online with supplements from the NSA World Fact Book" Bryan said. "The population of Trondheim is around 200,000. Namsos is much smaller, with 13,000 as of the last census two years ago."

A pair of color graphs appeared. "These show the total Internet traffic for a ten-day period through the regional network hubs serving each spot. Notice anything unusual?"

Sam leaned forward and eyed the numbers. He'd learned enough over the past few days to spot the anomaly right away. "If I'm reading this right" he said, frowning slightly, "Namsos had seventy-four percent of Trondheim's network traffic volume in the \_same period?!\_" He glanced at the other two for confirmation.

John nodded. "Awful lot of bandwidth for a small population, wouldn't you say? And forty-two percent of that traffic was encrypted with military-grade ciphers."

"Which, in turn, has led us to believe there's more to that part of the world than meets the eye" Bryan finished. "Google Earth won't get lower than ten miles altitude, and none of the geo-survey services give out anything of higher resolution either. They claim 'international agreements' keep them out. It all adds up to 'Strike One,' as it were."

More keys clicked. Another overlay lit up, covering the island itself. White fuzzy spots of varying sizes appeared all over it. "Do you know who AMSAT is?" Bryan asked.

Sam nodded. "Jarod mentioned them. They're the group who puts up amateur radio satellites?"

Bryan nodded. "Four years ago, AMSAT-VK, their Australian branch, launched VO-70. It was the first amateur-built bird to carry infrared cameras. The idea was to do studies of ocean warming and compare the results with those from commercial weather satellites.

"Those white blots are heat blooms from live bodies. I know your first reaction is going to be to write them off as local wildlife, and some of them probably are. But take a look at how that group in the upper right corner is positioned before you make a conclusion."

Sam did so. His eyes suddenly widened. "That's an awful lot of hot-spots in a small area" he mused. "Can you time-lapse it?"

Bryan did so. The heat clusters moved significantly, but all within the same general area and in astonishingly straight and smooth patterns. "That could well be human presence" Sam said, softly. "Lots of it!"

"In an area which, supposedly, is protected wilderness" John said. "AMSAT, thinking they'd uncovered an illegal settlement within the preserve, dutifully turned the data over to the Norwegian government.

Said government thanked them for their diligence and ingenuity and said they would 'investigate promptly.'

"Two days later, the cameras on VO-70 stopped working. No indication of what happened. The comm transponders still worked, so AMSAT simply wrote it off as equipment failure and got on with their lives. No way to tell what really happened short of physically retrieving the bird and going over it with a fine-tooth comb."

The map blinked out. "I get the feeling you don't believe the 'failure' angle" Sam said.

"Oh, we believe the failure was real" John replied. "It's the \_cause\_ we're questioning. The end result is the same: Strike Two."

A 3D video clip blossomed to life, one of a cloudy gray sky with the overcast just starting to break. Suddenly, across a tiny gap between the clouds, a red-and-tan winged shape sailed by, out of focus and indistinct. Sam's first thought was of a large bedraggled bird.

"This clip was taken by a tourist on the passenger ferry in Stjordal, in late July of this year, using their phone's camera" Bryan explained. "They posted it to Flickr, Photobucket, and a couple of birdwatching sites asking for an ID. The kicker, as I'm sure you've realized, is there \_aren't\_ any birds of this apparent size, with red plumage, in \_any\_ part of the world."

"There was lots of buzz and speculation all over the 'net for quite a while. Someone finally got tired of all the wild guesses â€" which, by the way, ranged from an oversized heron to an extraterrestrial bat â€" and submitted the footage to the Norwegian wildlife people. Their response was... interesting, to say the least."

Keys clicked. A newspaper clipping from the English translation of 'Bellona' appeared next to the image. The story said the Norwegian government had declared the picture an elaborate hoax or publicity stunt, along the lines of the allegedly 'authentic' photos of the Loch Ness monster.

Sam was not convinced. "If you're showing me this, you must have a different opinion" he said.

"You could say that" John replied. "Watch what happens when we run the footage through Forevid. It's an open-source video forensics package."

The footage restarted, advanced to where the winged shape was clearest and freeze-framed. The image shimmered, zoomed in, refocused and broke into a series of tiny squares before finally resettling intoâ€"

Sam gasped. Enormous leathery wings supported the creature, their ribs visible as gracefully curving shadows through the translucent scarlet membrane. The legs were dark red, with formidable claws sprouting from four-toed feet in a three-forward/one-back configuration similar to birds-of-prey. The tail was long and thin, well equipped with what looked very much like spines.

Once again, Sam felt an odd prickle of Deja vu. "Strike Three" he

murmured.

"Exactly" Bryan said. "And there have been numerous other aerial sightings in the same part of the world, far more than can be accounted for by the stock UFO stories. Taken as single events, these pieces are just random noise. Take them together... well, I'm sure you can see the same pattern we did."

Sam nodded, then yawned suddenly as the combination of fatigue and high-quality mint tea did its work. He got up carefully, trying not to disturb Kenya, bid John and Bryan good night and made his way to his assigned room. He drifted off to sleep easily enough, though his thoughts were very much on FWA-7G3 and how he might wangle clearance for a low-altitude flyover.

\* \* \*

><p>The new information gave Sam a renewed sense of purpose. He threw himself into his studies vigorously enough to draw surprised approval from his coaches and startled looks from the other students. He learned more than he ever thought possible in the time available, including a deep understanding of what Jarod had termed 'gray areas.'

As he'd said, none of it was outright illegal " just unusual for a typical person to be interested in. His confidence grew almost as rapidly as his paranoia. He found it ironically amusing to be learning tricks of the intelligence field which would have shocked him to his core a month ago.

What shocked him more was just how much personal data he'd been 'leaking' over the years, simply by doing little things he'd taken for granted: Using a 'member privilege' card when shopping for groceries, leaving his smartphone on, filling out the so-called 'warranty registration' cards for equipment he'd bought, using ATM cards, even participating in social networking sites.

Some of the coaches were as fascinating as the material they taught. One of his favorites was a stocky dark-haired lady of Scottish ancestry, Danielle McLean, barely a meter and a half tall. She taught (among other things) pattern recognition and computer forensics. It wasn't until he'd seen her using a white cane that he realized she was blind; her manner in the classroom, the first time he'd met her, hadn't given him the slightest hint.

He found out later her blindness was not total. Though her center vision was gone, in the manner of a camera with an ink blot in the middle of its lens, her peripheral vision was very much intact. As a result, she tended to look at people sideways instead of straight on. It gave her an air of sly appeal which made her classes all the more interesting.

She'd started simply enough. "It's pretty much impossible these days to do without some kind of computer, or communications hookup, unless you plan on taking up residence with the Amish." The class had laughed at this, Sam included.

"This, however, is where it gets complicated" she continued, amusement lighting her hazel eyes. "Every time you access a computer, anywhere, for any purpose, you leave a trace. If that computer is

networked to others, the trace can spread. If it's connected to the Internet, the trace can leak and spread halfway around the planet in less time than it takes me to finish this sentence."

She then proceeded to demonstrate, with the help of Duck-Duck-Go, Dogpile, Ixquick, Bing, and a few other search engines Sam had never heard of, just how much information she could pull up about several of the students.

They were all shocked when she was able to find things like their birth dates, shopping history, income level, likes, dislikes, and even a few Citizen ID numbers, all with a few keystrokes. Stunned silence reigned after she'd finished.

"Fortunately" she continued, with a wicked grin, "keeping yourself well protected is easy, if you keep just two things in mind: Always be aware of what information you're giving out, and who or what you're giving it to. Just asking yourself 'Does this feel right?' or 'Is this really necessary?' before you give up any personal info can save you a lot of grief."

Even more fascinating were her lectures on computing security and 'social' engineering. "If you have physical access to any computer or network, no matter how secure it may be from the outside, and you have the right tools, you own it" she'd said. "A competent tech, under such conditions, can have the machine spilling its guts in minutes.

"Best of all, the vast majority of the software tools to do such things are freely available, while many of the better ones are very affordable. Why? Because network admins and computing security people use these same tools to test their own equipment!"

Someone had chipped in with a question about the morality of using "or misusing" such technological trickery. "You're right to be concerned" Danielle said. "You are responsible for your own actions. Perhaps the best way I can say it is: Technology is nothing more than a tool, and a neutral one at that. It can serve the forces of 'Good' or 'Evil' at the drop of a hat. It's completely up to whoever's doing the dropping and in what context.

"Remember: This is your information we're talking about. It came from you, it is specific or pertinent to you. Wouldn't you want to know, for example, what information a government agency might be keeping about you, outside of the normal things like income and tax records? FOIA requests can only take you so far."

There was a low rumble of agreement. "This is one area where you have to allow your conscience free reign" she said. "In general, don't go fishing at random; pay attention to collecting data pertinent to you or your life and leave the rest alone, no matter how intriguing or tempting it may look. This way, even if you get caught, you've got a pretty strong defense.

"In short, don't make the same mistakes Gary McKinnon did in the early part of the century."

"But if it's our information, or pertinent to us" another student asked, "why would we need to fight to get it? Why would we even need to resort to any means which may be illegal?"

"Because there will always be people or organizations looking to gain an advantage â€" power, if you will â€" over other people" Danielle replied. "Simple human nature, no one's immune. There will always be those who will grab at any advantage over others. Collecting personal data is a prime means of doing so. What you've chosen to learn here is nothing more than a form of self-defense against a world which will cheerfully eat you alive if you let it." She grinned. "Any more questions?"

There hadn't been. Sam learned, practiced, learned more, practiced again. Like the others, he slowly accumulated his own customized tool pouch; a collection of small hardware, hand tools and USB drives. The latter contained, between them, enough diagnostic and maintenance software â€" all perfectly legal, free or purchased â€" to give any IT security specialist nightmares.

As he neared the end of his second week, he found himself looking back in astonishment at his own naivete. Certainly, UNEC was a valuable organization with a noble mission. However, it was no more immune to human foibles than any other bureaucracy.

It was all too clear to him now; the chain of events following his 'rescue'â€" award of a new ship barely into the 'deployment' phase, overly-quick disposal of his old craft, hustling him back into duty â€" had been little more than an effort to distract him from thinking about anything other than his normal work.

Then, almost before he knew it, 'graduation' was upon them. The informality of it astonished him; he received a certificate of completion, a hearty "well done!" from all his coaches, and an electric blue polo shirt with 'Tesla's Basement' embroidered in bright yellow above the breast pocket. Far more valuable to him was the personal send-off he got from Bryan, John and Kenya as he was getting ready to catch his flight home.

"We've not been able to dig up anything more on the island" John said, as they were driving him to Moffett Field. "Which, honestly, comes as no surprise. If there really is something there, you're going to have to find it at your end."

"You can't just ask for flyover clearance" Bryan added. "Not without attracting attention you probably don't want. Had any more memory flashes?"

"A few" Sam replied. "I remember meeting at least four dragons, the two small ones and two of the black ones. I remember their names, except for the green, and I also feel like one of the black dragons is very important to me. Outside that..."

He shrugged helplessly. "What I can't understand is why keep such an amazing new species so secret? Transparency is one of UNEC's founding principles. How many species have been nearly wiped out over the last century because of misinformation? Sharks, just as one example."

They both glanced at him, their expressions confused. "Wiped out? Hardly" said John.

"Predator Preservation Act, 2053" Bryan added. "Among other things,

it restricted divers to non-lethal shark repellants. Thanks to Keller and Swanson at Bell Labs, and their work in underwater sound propagation, it's easy enough to get a widget which keeps toothy scavengers at a comfortable distance."

Sam was startled. "I've never heard of them" he said. "Or the law you mentioned."

Bryan shrugged as he pulled the van into the drop-off lane. "You've been hit with so much over the past couple of weeks, I'm not surprised. Look it up later. Fascinating stuff, being able to focus sound in a tight beam! You've never heard of a SASER?"

Sam could only shake his head in bewilderment as he collected his bag. Just before he pulled himself out of his seat, a large pair of golden-furred paws landed on his right shoulder. He turned to see Kenya peering at him intently. As the caracal held his gaze, two words popped into the vet's head: Hunt well!

He smiled, and reached up one hand to scratch between the cat's elegantly tufted ears. Kenya purred thunderously, eyes half shut. "Thanks" Sam said, softly. "I will."

"One more thing" Bryan said, as Sam climbed out. "Send Jarod our greetings, of course, but ask him to show you his fishing spot."

The vet thought this over. "I'm not much of a fisherman" he began.

"Don't worry about that" John said. "Just get him to take you. Think of it as a post-vacation break. Trust us."

This produced a knowing grin from Sam. "You two are probably the only people I can trust right now" he said. "Thanks. Seriously. You've given me a lot to think about."

"Come back any time" Bryan called as he pulled away, one arm out the driver's window in a now-familiar gesture from an ancient (but classic) science-fiction series: The second and third fingers parted to form a 'V,' thumb extended to form a smaller 'V' with the forefinger. Sam responded in kind, chuckling. "Peace and long life indeed" he said, as he went inside.

He spent half the flight back at one of the onboard computer terminals, researching the law Bryan had mentioned and catching up on news. What he found raised as many questions as it answered. Yes, numerous shark species had become threatened or endangered, but legislation restricting indiscriminate hunting had been passed at least a decade earlier than he remembered. There was no record whatsoever of the near-extinction event involving Bluefins and Hammerheads in 2060.

There were other quirks as well, minor by themselves but forming a bizarre pattern Sam had no explanation for. As one example, he was stunned to find all the oceanariums he'd thought closed, or converted to research centers, still fully operational as tourist attractions. Worse, he could find no mention of the Herman Institute's cetacean communication breakthrough he knew had happened in 2055. In fact, the Institute itself seemed to be in dire straits, going through all kinds of gyrations just to stay minimally funded.



Granted, no orcas were being kept in captivity, but the continued presence of dolphins in the aquatic circuses bothered him deeply. He made a mental note to look deeper into the issue later on, with the help of the UNEC Archives.

About the time he discovered the unexpected IUCN 'Least Concern' status of purple herons, a species his own memory told him should have been listed as 'Extinct in Wild,' fatigue caught up with him in a sudden rush. He shut down the terminal, found an open bunk, and stretched out. For once, his sleep was deep and dreamless.

Jarod was quick to agree to show Sam his fishing spot. In fact, 'agree' was putting it mildly; the tech had been downright enthusiastic about it. Sam sensed there was something Jarod wasn't telling him, but neither did he sense any threat.

The workweek was, if anything, quieter than normal, though Sam made deliberate efforts to exercise his newly-discovered talent for 'speaking' to animals. He found it worked best if he spoke what he wanted to say aloud, as if whatever animal he was working with could understand the actual words. Every so often, he'd 'hear' a reply; usually something simple like good or pain gone.

As his gift developed further, so did his skill in diagnoses and treatment. An unexpected backlash became apparent to him when many of his coworkers started grumbling about 'brown-nosing' and 'bucking for promotion,' despite Sam's protests of simply wanting to do a good job. He didn't dare mention his mental talent, though it bothered him to have people he'd previously gotten along with start pulling away.

Worse, he had never been one to make friends easily. With Gerry gone, and Dash attending some sort of 'Leadership Workshop' in Geneva, it was a lonely week. He was only too glad when Saturday rolled around, despite having to be in the air (at Jarod's insistence) at 05:00 local.

Chill pre-dawn light revealed a dense low overcast, the air heavy with humidity but without the sharp scent of rain. Sam was all too grateful to clamber into the warm front passenger seat of Jarod's forest-green Volvo Helios, even if Jarod insisted on keeping the drive running and the craft hovering a few centimeters above the ground. "What's your hurry?" Sam asked, as he closed the door and fastened his safety harness.

For answer, Jarod grinned and shoved a stubby throttle lever forward. Sam yelped as the Helios's drive system roared, sending the aircar hurtling skyward fast enough to all but bury him in the padding. Within ten seconds, they were enveloped by gray overcast, moisture trails streaking across the windows.

Ten more and they burst into clear air. The rising sun painted the cloud layer below them with a hundred different shades of orange, peach, and pale gold shading to eye-searing white. The entire scene hung perfectly poised on the sky's canvas of bright blue. Sam started to relax as the beauty of their surroundings wrapped him in a familiar and comforting feeling of isolation, despite the fact he wasn't piloting. "Wow..." was all he could manage.

Jarod chuckled, a wide grin splitting his features. "That's what happens when you replace the factory turbines with P&W SC-E sixties, add a high-density fuel cell and cargo-class TQ lifters. Flat-out, she'll almost match your VetMed ship for speed. The only thing stock about her is the interior and most of the avionics."

Sam nodded absently. His attention was flipping between the outside view and the navigation display. It showed them climbing to one of the long-distance traffic lanes at 4800 meters ASL on a northeasterly course, passing just north of the Isle of Man and over Alladale Heights. It didn't take them long to leave the clouds behind, as the craft sailed along above the blue-gray expanse of the North Sea..

"So where is it we're going?" Sam asked, more than a little puzzled. "Your car's not amphibious, is it?"

"Nope. Emergency flotation only. Don't need wet-running where we're going."

"Which is?" Sam prompted again.

Jarod took his time replying. "You already know I like to explore, especially remote areas. Last year, I found this neat little grotto, tucked away on an island just a bit northwest of Bekkjarvik. The island itself was declared a historic site by the Norwegian government some time ago, but they do allow limited visits. I'm not saying any more than that â€" you'll just have to settle for being surprised!"

He leaned forward and tapped a multicolored label, about three inches square, applied to the top center of the windshield. Thanks to his newly-minted tech skills, Sam was quick to notice the shadowy outline of an RFID chip embedded in the material. "Norway National Parks season pass" Jarod said. "Runs only about a hundred Euros a year, and the proceeds all go toward maintaining the sites."

The Volvo leveled out and Jarod set the autopilot. "So â€" Tell me about your break! How did you like Tesla's Basement?"

It took Sam most of the flight to fill Jarod in. He laughed out loud when the vet described Kenya's antics. "I got to see him when he was still a half-grown kitten. Give him a laser pointer to chase and you'd get a couple of hours of free entertainment with very little effort. No guarantees on what the room would look like afterward, though."

The navigation computer dinged, then announced: "Sixteen kilometers to destination â€" Bergen Center clearance received for normal approach at pilot's discretion. Assume manual control within thirty seconds." \_

Sunlight sparkled off gentle swells as Jarod brought the craft down to their approach altitude of two hundred meters. Sam watched the approaching island with considerable interest.

"I'll do a flyover before we set down" Jarod said. "It'll help you orient yourself, especially since we'll have to hike in from the landing site. It's about a half-kilometer or so."

Sam nodded, taking in the details. The island sported a natural horseshoe-shaped harbor, its coarse-sanded beach liberally decorated with driftwood and flecks of volcanic rock. A small dock, its boards bearing the distinctive honey color of waterproof Trex decking, poked out into the low surf. A switchback series of ramps, made of similar material, was secured to the cliff face.

"It's possible to sail here" Jarod said, as he flew slowly inland. "In fact, they still run tours from the mainland during peak season."

"Tours? Here?" the vet said, clearly surprised.

Jarod nodded. "Remember, Berk is a historical site. Apparently, this island and its former residents were a major hub for trade in the area a thousand or so years ago."

Shock coursed through Sam. He grabbed Jarod's arm and demanded "What did you just say?!"

Jarod looked startled as he guided the craft over the wooded part of the island. "Hey, take it easy! I said it was a historical site, maybe a trade hubâ€"

"No, before that!" Sam snapped. "The island's name!"

"Berk" Jarod replied, concern in his eyes. "Have you been here before?"

Sam suddenly realized what he was doing. He took a deep breath, let go of Jarod's arm, and settled back in his seat. "I... didn't think so. But it seems familiar. I have no idea why!"

He said nothing more as they touched down on a grassy rise lined with multiple landing markers. Jarod shut down the craft's systems and they both climbed out, collecting the fishing gear from the cargo compartment and dividing it between them. Sam took a long, hard look at the rise, frowning to himself. \_Something's missing\_ he thought. \_I could have sworn there was a house here...\_

This and other thoughts kept his mind occupied as he followed Jarod into the forest. The air was just starting to get warm, a gentle breeze carrying the scent of pine, Douglas fir, ferns, wildflowers and moss. Birds chattered and trilled all around them, darting crazily through the shafts of sunlight seeping through the canopy.

"We're almost there" Jarod said, after about ten minutes of steady hiking. "We turn left by that boulder up ahead, go downâ€"

"â€"the rise, climb down about four meters of rock wall" Sam continued, "and it opens out into one of the nicest grottoes you could ever hope for, miniature lake and all. Yes, I know."

He surged ahead with absolute confidence, leaving Jarod momentarily open-mouthed. "Hey, how'd you know?" he called, racing to catch up. "I thought you said you'd never been here before?!"

Sam ignored him as he ran, flashes of memory starting to form coherent patterns for the first time since his 'accident.' He

scrambled down the last set of rocks, nimble as a chimp, dropped to the ground, ducked between two low-lying bouldersâ€

and fell to his knees in shock, the fishing gear dropping from his limp hands. He knew this place. Intimately!

The lake, the scent of the water mixed with grass and flowers, the moss-hung trees, the oddly-shaped boulders, even the purple heron standing serenely in the shallows, one eye catching his before closing in a slow wink as two words sounded softly in his mind.

Welcome back.

The mental wall he'd been battering at for so long crumbled and broke apart like so much wet sand. The flood of memories it released threatened to overwhelm him.

The archway. Getting pulled into the past. A Viking village, one he'd taken at first for a modern isolated community. Sick dragons and their human friends, torn apart because of something they had no knowledge of. A hastily-improvised cure, once he learned the truth. The gratitude of an entire village. Thinking he was stranded in the past, then discovering the secret of the gateway. Ingrid, the village healer and wise-woman. Two scaly stowaways on his return trip.

And one particular Night Fury who had set him free to soar with her, his decades-old fear of heights melted away like leftover winter ice.

Skye.

"You've been holding out on me!" Jarod complained, as he popped out from between the last two boulders. "When were you hereâ€"

He broke off, alarmed by Sam's kneeling position and his very visible trembling. He stepped forward, dropping his own fishing gear to the ground, and knelt next to his friend. "Hey, are you OK?" he asked, one hand reaching out to grip the vet's shoulder.

Sam turned slowly to regard him, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "I'm fine" he said, in a confident tone Jarod had never heard him use before. "Or I will be, soon enough." He reached up a hand to clasp Jarod's. "Yes, I have been here before â€" about twelve hundred years ago, to be exact. It looks very much the same. Thanks for bringing me."

Jarod was so surprised, his mind didn't even register the part about 'twelve hundred years.' "Your memory!" he said.

"Everything's back" Sam replied, as he let go and stood up. "Even the purple heron over thereâ€"

He blinked. The bird was gone, not so much as a ripple disturbing the spot where it had been and no sound of wings to herald its departure. "What heron?" Jarod asked, puzzled.

Sam didn't answer right away. He walked over to the closest spot on the shore to the bird's former position and started poking around. "He was there a moment ago... Ah! Yes!"

He reached into the reeds and plucked out a single contour feather, snow-white with purple iridescence. Laughter bubbled up from deep inside him, joyful and full-throated. He felt like he'd spent the last month wandering underground, trapped, with only occasional glimpses of the open sky before finally emerging into clear sunlight. Jarod just stood there, staring at him like he'd finally come unhinged.

Still chuckling, he brought the feather back to show his friend. Jarod studied it with considerable interest. "Never seen that shade of iridescence outside of a crow or pigeon" he said. "Certainly not on a heron, no matter the common name." He looked back up at the vet, puzzled.

"Come on" Sam said, clapping the tech on one shoulder. "Let's get the gear set up, and I'll tell you all about it."

The sun was high overhead by the time Sam finished. They hadn't caught so much as a minnow between them, but Jarod was too fascinated by the vet's tale to care.

Finally, he looked back up at Sam and sighed gustily. "Time travel. A Viking village. Sentient fire-breathing dragons." He shook his head slightly. "If it weren't for the photos, and the fact you got through the course at Tesla's, I'd already have called in the division shrink!" He shook his head. "It fits, though. Crazy as it sounds, it's the only thing I've heard which ties all the weird crap from the last month together." He started reeling his line in, slowly. "So what's next?"

Sam smiled a little, as he cast his own line out again. "As much as UNEC Command would, apparently, like to keep this quiet" he said, slowly, "I can't pretend I still don't remember. No matter how hard I try, sooner or later, something's going to slip."

"So?" Jarod said, casting his own line back out. "You can't just go showing those pictures around and telling people about the two small â€" dragons? â€" you brought back either. You don't know if it's the time travel or the existence of dragons Command wants kept under wraps."

"Probably both" Sam replied. "Though I'm far less interested in the time travel aspect than the existence of dragons. As for the latter, I think it has to do with conclusive proof of a sentient, non-human species. The idea alone would scare a lot of people pretty badly, to say nothing of what it would do to the very foundations of most religions."

"The old 'God made us in His image' thing?" Jarod asked.

"Exactly," said Sam. "Though how anyone can believe such a powerful and creative entity would limit themselves to one image is beyond me, especially when the same belief system says the same entity created everything, and put a spark of themselves into that same 'everything.'"

"The crazy part of this whole mess is, in the past I remember, dolphins and whales have already been proven sentient! And yes, the discovery scared a lot of people and rocked the Catholic Church back

on its collective knees. \_But they got over it! \_Everyone did. And it opened up a whole new series of ideas and questions no one had even thought of before."

Jarod's grip on his fishing rod went limp, and his eyes practically bugged out of his skull as he turned to stare at his friend. "They're \_sentient?!\_" He gasped. "As in self-aware?!"

Sam returned his gaze steadily. "Just as much as either of us" he said. "That's why I was so surprised to find oceanariums still running as tourist attractions.

"In the past I remember, Jarod, the proof came when the Lou Herman Memorial Institute developed a working synthetic language in 2055. They opened the first verbal communication ever with dolphins. No matter the first exchange was... well, a bit bawdy, to put it politely. The point is, they did it!

"Some pretty radical changes followed in the next twenty years. \_All\_ the places holding captive dolphins or whales of any species were eventually required to offer them a choice: Release into the wild, or permanent residence at one of the protected open-water preserves, like the big one near Grassy Key in Florida, in exchange for advancing the research. Only about a quarter of the dolphins chose wild release, but the changes still spelled the end of cetaceans as a tourist attraction.

"Next came renewed interest in space exploration. Or maybe 'renewed' is too soft a word. Interest ramped up so fast, the schools were having trouble turning out engineering and life sciences graduates fast enough." He grinned. "First Contact had already been made right here at home. All of a sudden, an awful lot of people were interested in trying for Second."

For a long time after Sam finished, the only sounds in the hollow were lapping water, wind, and birdsong. Finally, Jarod spoke again. "I always suspected" he said, softly, staring out over the lake. "Ever since Bryan and John introduced me to some of the dolphins at a nature preserve in Mexico. The first time I touched one, the first time one looked me straight in the eyes, I couldn't shake the feeling there was a lot more there than anyone had ever imagined..."

Suddenly, he looked back at Sam, his gaze puzzled. "Wait... You said 'in the past \_you\_ remember...?"

Sam nodded. "Things are different from what I remember before I got sucked through that portal" he said. "If it was just little things like, say, the Golden Gate Bridge painted blue or the Sphinx having an intact nose, I wouldn't even break a sweat about it.

"Instead, I find major differences." He explained about the anomalies he'd found during the return flight. "The only connection they all share is my presence in the past. I don't know what I changed, Jarod, or how, but my little jaunt obviously had some unpleasant side effects. It's my responsibility â€" Frell, it's my \_duty\_ â€" as a Ranger to do my best to fix it!"

Jarod laughed. Sam thought it sounded a bit forced. "In short, you need to change the world. Hey, no problem! First thing to do is visit

the Herman Institute, give them all the funds they need for a new supercomputer, and point them in the right direction. They'll be so grateful for the donation, they won't even ask who you are!"

"Your sarcasm is touching" Sam growled, with a glare which would have curdled milk. He waited for the tech's hilarity to die down, then continued.

"My first step will be to lay low, pretend this was just a weekend getaway. Thanks to Nalu finding me, after I treated that eagle, I know he and Niho are still Out There. I'm also fairly certain the call I heard the same evening was a Night Fury. Coupled with what I learned from Bryan and John, it points to at least a couple of dragon species still living to this day. I'm going to find them, no matter what it takes!"

Jarod eyed him uncertainly, startled by his sudden vehemence. "Sam, are you sure about this? You've got your memory back. Isn't that enough without rocking the proverbial boat?"

"Where's Gerry Hoshino?" Sam countered. "And do I just let whoever screwed with my head get away with it?"

The reel buzzed like an angry hornet as the vet pulled his line back in. He cast it back out hard enough to draw a whistle from the rod's tip. When he spoke again, his voice was tight with barely-controlled rage.

"They tried to take away part of my life, Jarod! We are, as a species, the product of what our memories and experiences teach us. There's already been more than ample proof of the saying 'Those who fail to learn from History are doomed to repeat it.' Take away memory, and you're stuck repeating old mistakes. No one has the right to do such a thing to someone else!"

"Even when doing so stops harm to others?" Jarod shot back. "Don't tell me you forgot that psycho arsonist, back in 2081?"

Sam's gaze wandered out over the lake, his expression bleak. "The 'Fireman' they called him. A sick joke, considering how much damage he did before they finally caught him."

He sighed, then looked back at Jarod. "But my point holds. Some combination of factors made him into what he was, prompted him to act as he did. How can we be certain some part of our culture was not to blame?"

His companion had no ready answer. Encouraged, Sam forged ahead. "A topic for another time" he said, firmly. "It's not just the question of an illegal memory wipe. UNEC's Charter calls for transparency and disclosure about every living species discovered. It has to be that way! How can anyone safely visit a wilderness area without knowing what they might encounter or whether it's dangerous? How can anyone respect another creature's habitat if they don't even know the creature exists?!"

"Given this, UNEC Command has violated its own Charter by not making it clear dragons exist. As a commissioned officer of UNEC, I swore an oath to uphold and defend that same Charter against, and I quote, 'All enemies, foreign and domestic.' Seems to me 'All' means

'\_All,'\_ even if the enemy is UNEC itself."

Jarod was a lot of things. 'Slow' was not among them. His eyes bugged as he realized what his friend had in mind. "Sam, you can't! Not with a few photos and circumstantial evidence. No court in the world would back you with so little to go on!"

"You're absolutely right" Sam agreed. "Which is why I need to find the \_real \_record of my debriefing. Next, I need to find a way into FWA-7G3, permission or not, and see if I can convince one or more of our scaly friends to show themselves."

Jarod froze in mid-cast, staring at Sam as though he'd suddenly grown wings. Then he burst out laughing. "Sure, Sam, sure" he gasped, around his merriment. "Just fly your ship on in and set down in the middle of the island. Ignore the fighter craft from the Norwegian military, they're just window dressing. And never mind how you'll get taken apart by Dash, if he doesn't throw you out of the service on your ear. It's all worth it!"

He rolled his eyes skyward and finished his interrupted cast. Sam stared at him, suddenly conscious of one glaring fact. \_He doesn't get it. For all his smarts and skills, he doesn't understand why I \_have\_ to do this.\_

The tech's next words confirmed it. "I know you well enough to see you're going to bull on ahead. I said I'd help you get your memory back, and that's what I've done."

Sam's guts clenched for a moment. "So what, exactly, are you saying?"

Jarod didn't meet his gaze. "I'm saying my part in this mess is over. The rest is up to you. I value my pension too much!"

The vet considered this, fighting down the impulse to lash out. Though his voice trembled a little, his next words were steady. "UNEC lied to you as well" he said. "They faked the damage to my old shipâ€"

"â€"And found a record of the deep metallurgical scan I'd run later on" the tech replied. When he finally looked over at Sam, the vet was startled to see real fear in his eyes. "Yes, I got grilled about it. No, it wasn't routine. No, I didn't mention anything about our dinner meeting or my findings."

His gaze turned pleading. "Sam... Whatever we've stepped into, it's deep! I found a keylogger plugged into my workstation the day after I was questioned. If Command is pulling stunts like that, and going as far as dorking with your memory, there's no telling \_what\_ they might try next.

"I value you as a friend, so I'll give you one last bit of advice: My transfer request for Yorkshire Regional HQ was accepted last Monday, and I report in this coming Monday. My sister lives in the area, so I had a good solid excuse. For your sake, I strongly suggest you content yourself with your restored memory and do your own transfer, preferably to another continent! We can get together in a couple of years, after all this has blown over, and swap stories."



The news startled Sam. "Why regional? If they're already suspicious of you, they'll â€" Oh!" His expression suddenly registered understanding.

Jarod nodded. "Hide in plain sight. Works every time."

Sam considered this. His mind went through a crazy whirl of options, even to the point of thinking about what posts might be open in California.

Cool, clear purpose suddenly settled around him like a comfortable cloak. Jarod saw the change in his eyes, and turned away. "I was afraid of that" he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Sam, for the record: I think you're bonkers. Period."

The vet laughed. "Have to be, in this line of work" he replied, as he started reeling in his line again. "Are we done here?"

Jarod nodded. "In more ways than one. But I'll still treat you to lunch."

A few minutes later, the grotto was, once again, deserted.

### 13. Chapter 13

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 13\*\***

"\_First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you. Then they fight you. Then you win."\_

(Mahatma Ghandi)

The Sunday morning sky was a sullen dark gray as Sam set his ship down on the transient parking apron. A blast of cold wind hit him as he climbed down the boarding ladder, heralding the incoming storm. He winced, and pulled the hood of his jacket firmly into place. \_Be raining before noon\_ he thought, as he slung a well-worn day pack over his shoulder and hurried towards the nearest personnel door.

What was once known as Wheldrake Base had started as a small add-on to the Yorkshire Air Museum. Over time, it had grown tremendously; besides housing a Ranger force large enough to handle eight wildlife preserves, its centralized location and proximity to larger cities had made it the obvious choice to house UNEC's regional data center and archives.

Another of Danielle's lectures drifted through Sam's mind, as he showed his ID to the guard at the reception desk and walked to the bank of elevators: \_Exhaust all possible sources of publicly-available information before you go digging any deeper. You may just get lucky and find what you're after without ever having to bend any rules.\_

He'd done so, and more, starting with the WAC and Sectional aeronautical charts for much of Norway. Given what he'd already learned, it had come as no surprise to find a large section of

restricted airspace (labeled MOA â€" Military Operations Area) covering FWA-7G3.

What had surprised him was the degree of the restrictions. Most MOA's, which were not over areas critical to national security, required only a routine radio contact with the appropriate authorities.

With 7G3, all flights, no matter if they were civilian, routine military or law enforcement, were required to maintain a minimum altitude of 3,050 meters AGL within the zone. Even then, there was a very explicit requirement for prior clearance from the RNAF base at Årland for any type of flyover, a requirement which called for 24-hour advance notice. Entering or landing within the area, outside of a life-threatening emergency or special clearance, was strictly forbidden and would draw a prompt military response.

It was painfully obvious that any attempt to enter the area by stealth was a lost cause. Even if he could disable the telemetry and transponder on his ship or personal car, without raising all kinds of uncomfortable questions, radar invisibility was not among their capabilities.

Part of what he planned to do today was see if there were other options available. Code Eight status ("Self-guided, Command-approved research and training, vehicle use authorized, subject to emergency recall") was ideal for such purposes.

The elevator's chime broke into his thoughts as its doors slid open. Sam sighed and stepped in, scratching idly at his newly-shaved chin. He had, with some regret, shed his goatee earlier that week, and darkened his hair color. To any who didn't know him well, his current appearance would add a layer of anonymity essential for what he had in mind.

A few minutes of maglev shuttle travel and another short elevator ride put him in the lobby of the Archive and Library complex. The high-ceilinged room, with its warm-toned wood paneling, granite floor and enormous chandelier, never failed to carry a faint musty scent of paper. Sam smiled slightly as he walked towards the reception desk, his footsteps echoing in the cavernous space. Even with the advances in computer storage and electronic books, the printed page still held an allure which all the flashy technology in the world had yet to match!

The desk attendant, a skinny dark-haired youth in the dove-gray uniform of Information Technology Services, barely glanced up from his E-book reader when Sam showed his ID and asked for the use of a private workstation. "Take any open spot you want" he said, jerking a thumb towards the short stairway to the reading room. "You're the only other one here today."

Sam swallowed a burst of annoyance â€" he'd been hoping for solitude â€" thanked the youth, and made his way through the first set of doors and up the steps. He froze just inside the second pair of doors, startled by his first sight of a facility at dramatic odds with what he'd imagined.

To his left, floor-to-ceiling windows ran the entire length of the hundred-meter long room, providing a breathtaking view of the entire

complex and the surrounding country. The colors visible through the glass were slightly muted, a characteristic of the variable-density tint the windows were coated with. Depending on how much current was fed into each window's electrodes, it could go from practically invisible to dark enough for arc welding.

On his right, row upon row of book and optical media shelves stood as tall as he was. He knew the shelves went on for three floors up and two more down, all sharing a common support structure. In the space between the windows and the shelves, neat rows of high-walled work cubicles alternated with couches, open study tables, and even a few beanbag chairs.

The whole room was done in peaceful shades of blue and green, with gray trim here and there. Part of the back wall sported a series of dumbwaiters, through which material on the lower floors could be supplied to the reading or conference rooms as needed, and there was a station for a pair of reference librarians (currently empty) in the far corner.

The only sounds were the rush of air conditioning and the soft clicking of keys from one of the cubicles. Sam could just make out a pair of blue-uniformed legs, sticking out to the rear of the cubie's chair.

\_I could get used to this\_ he thought, as he moved to a vacant cubicle. The other Ranger didn't even stir, keys clicking away at a steady pace. \_Probably under headphones\_ Sam thought, as he sat down and brought the cube's workstation to life. Moments later, he was logged on and searching the crash report files.

It didn't take long to find what he was after. He smiled grimly as he skimmed the 'official' report and its finding of no-fault on his own part, then slowed down as the log dumps from his old ship's 'Black Box' started scrolling across the screen.

Everything looked fine until he got to the point just after the eclipse had gone total and the smuggler's rifle had triggered the portal. The logs promptly degenerated into some of the most intricate truth-twisting and outright fabrication Sam had ever come across. Here, for example, was an entry which showed his old craft on the receiving end of a huge energy strike, characteristic of a plasma charge. However, the numbers for his comm equipment showed perfectly normal right up until the recorder claimed a multi-G impact.

\_Any plasma bolt that strong would have taken out every comm system onboard\_ he mused. \_Considering\_ \_the entire structure of the flight recorder is designed to\_ \_prevent\_ \_tampering\_, \_it would have taken a master's touch to accomplish this kind of alteration and still make it pass muster. I wonder how deep this rabbit hole really goes?\_

His watch beeped. He glanced at it, swore softly, and requested a permanent copy of everything he'd just read. A couple of minutes later, the disk writer built into the table spat out an eight-centimeter optical disk and a matching jewel case for it. He snatched them both up, stuck the disk in the case and shoved it into a pocket, then logged out and headed for the men's room. The other Ranger was still typing away, utterly oblivious.

Although every instinct screamed at him to \_run,\_ he deliberately

held his pace. Short of a base-wide emergency, running might attract attention he really didn't care for. \_Besides\_ he thought, as he entered the restroom and ducked into one of the stalls, \_they'll have enough to worry about in just a few more minutes.\_

He grinned wickedly as he changed. Off came the jacket, revealing an IT Services shirt identical to the one the desk attendant had been wearing, except for the addition of blue supervisor's stripes circling the sleeves\_. \_He stuffed the jacket into the pack and pulled out several other items.

His boots were next, followed by the pants. Ranger-blue Xenylon was quickly exchanged for faded denim jeans, while black Velcro-closure work shoes replaced boots. IT Services, being on the civil-service side of UNEC, was not subject to anywhere near as strict a dress code as commissioned officers, and Sam meant to take full advantage of it.

A pair of faux prescription glasses, aviator-style, completed the ensemble. Sam unlocked the stall door, stepped out, and checked himself in the mirror. \_Not bad at all\_ he thought, tilting his head slightly from one side to the other. \_Good thing I don't have to keep this look, or I'd have to get a new ID photo!\_

Seconds later, with his bag and boots tucked into the dark recesses of a supply closet, he was in the stairwell and heading down. A rumble of thunder filtered through as he passed the ground level exit. \_Outstanding!\_ he thought, as a flicker of lightning dotted the clouds. \_They'll be inclined to blame the storm...\_

He slipped quietly through the door at sub-level two, and glanced out into the corridor. It was utterly deserted, dimly lit, and filled with the steady hum and whoosh of machinery. The air felt warm, and more than a little muggy. Down the hall to his left, about ten meters away, was his goal: A sparsely-windowed room, thirty meters square, with an assortment of conduits and ducts varying from finger-size to meter-plus running from its far wall into the building's labyrinthine interior.

He glanced again at his watch, and felt his stomach tighten with anticipation. He was about to find out just how well he'd learned what Tesla's Basement had to teach. \_Ten seconds...\_

Ten became five. Five went to zero.

Nothing.

Motors hummed, fans pushed air around, relays clicked, compressors purred. All was, apparently, right with the HVAC world. A minute crept by, agonizingly slow to Sam's adrenaline-charged time sense, then another. "Frell!" he snapped, the sound lost in the mechanically-noisy atmosphere. \_Four-plus hours of work, wasted! Essence only knows what reallyâ€"\_

The lights went out. Seconds later, the battery-powered 'EXIT' lights and safety floods sprang to life. Klaxons blared a warning, causing Sam to jump nearly a half-meter, and a recorded voice echoed over the annunciator speakers: "INERGEN RELEASE, SUB-LEVEL TWO. ALL PERSONNEL, CLEAR THE AREA. INERGEN RELEASE, SUB-LEVEL TWO. ALL PERSONNEL..."

A sense of giddy triumph surged through him as the sound of multiple footsteps hurried towards the stairwell door. He took a deep breath and stepped out into plain sight, waving authoritatively at the exit and using his best 'command' voice: "Let's go! Everyone out... yes, that's it, straight up to level one, out the nearest exit... no, no idea what happened... Hey! What's more important, your lunch or your life?! Get moving!"

He waited ten seconds after the last of the techs had gone, then pulled the stairwell door shut and dashed towards the server room. Its only door, normally protected by a retinal scanner, had automatically unlocked in response to the fire alarm trigger. He pulled it open and yelled "Anyone else in here? Fire alert! Let's go, everyone out!"

Buzzers and the flicker of strobe lights were the only response. Sam grinned fiercely, charged inside, and closed every window blind he could get to. It took only a few moments to find the rack and server he was looking for. He muttered a prayer as he slipped the USB drive into place: "Saint Vidicon of Cathode, do your stuff...!"

The jump-drive's access light blinked uncertainly a couple of times, then settled down to a steady pulsing. On the front of the rack, the access lights on the SSD RAID banks went wild, as the search-and-retrieve script Sam had labored so diligently over did its work.

As he waited for the drive to fill, his mind flashed back to something John had told him during their nightly get-together at Tesla's Basement:

"\_System admins are as fundamentally lazy as anyone else, Sam. Do you have any idea how many of them simply walk away, leaving a server logged in with an administrator-level account, especially if they're in a supposedly secure data center?\_"

Such certainly seemed to be the case here, judging from the amount of activity his toy was kicking up. His only other means of getting to the server's guts would have been to shut it down, connect a data-forensics USB stick, and power up again.

While possibly a little faster, such tactics would have required far more involved preparations, such as waiting for a normal maintenance window when the system in question would already be shut down. However, such events were as tightly orchestrated as a performance of the Nutcracker. Short of actually transferring to IT, a move which would have raised far too many questioning eyebrows in any case, Sam's chances of being alone with the system long enough to get what he wanted would have been nearly nil.

The klaxon suddenly cut off in mid-blare. A series of loud metallic clangs and clunks echoed outside the server room, followed by a roar not unlike that of an old Hercules C-130 as the emergency ventilation fans whirled into action. \_Purge cycle\_ Sam thought, eyeing the jump-drive nervously. Its access light was still flashing red. \_I've got maybe three more minutes...\_

He didn't get that lucky. Forty seconds later, the fans shut down and their louvers closed, followed by the lights flickering back to normal. The annunciator sounded again: "CLEAR, SUB-LEVEL TWO. ALL

PERSONNEL, RETURN TO YOUR STATIONS. CLEAR, SUB-LEVEL TWO. ALL PERSONNEL..."

"Bloody hell" Sam muttered. He crouched lower behind the rack, his gaze flicking rapidly between the door and his USB drive. His hands felt damp, and his guts churned. Footsteps clanked on the walkway outside, coming closer by the second. \_Saint Vidicon, it's now or never...!\_

The door's retinal scanner hummed, followed by the buzz of the lock. Sam jumped to his feet, placing his body between the back of the server and the doorway. One hand moved deftly around the drive, pulled it free, and dropped it into his pocket just as the door was pushed open.

Five people entered. Two made a beeline for their workstations with the single-mindedness only programmers could muster, while the other three gathered just inside the door. "â€"years of work, you'd think they could come up with a false-proof alarm" announced a male voice in an Aussie accent. A moment later, the same voice rose in unmistakable annoyance. "And who closed the fucking blinds?! Fergie!"

The owner of the voice, a stocky fellow with sandy brown hair just starting to go gray around the edges, was wearing a supervisor's shirt identical to Sam's. He turned to glower at one of the younger techs, a pimply red-headed youth as thin as a rail, with the most prominent adam's apple Sam had ever seen. It bobbed like a superball as the teen replied. "It wasn't me, Colin" he announced, in a tenor that all but squeaked. "I was right on Janet's heels when we left!"

"You can say that again!" Declared the only female in the group, a brunette as tall as Sam, with a scattering of freckles. She planted both fists firmly on her hips as she eyed the unfortunate Fergie, her gray eyes flashing. "All but ran me down, so 'e did!" She complained, in a rich Cockney accent. Suddenly, her gaze settled on Sam. "'Ello, ello'" she continued. "And who 'ave we 'ere? Didn't you 'ear the alarm, mate?"

All five of the techs were now eyeing the vet, question marks practically popping out of their heads. For a few frantic seconds, Sam found himself unable to think, speak, or move.

Sudden calm descended on him like a comfortable cloak. He relaxed, and stepped clear of the rack. "Of course I did" he said, altering his voice slightly. He stepped boldly forward, and extended his right hand to the supervisor. The man took it, a little uncertainly, though his grip was firm. "I also heard the all-clear. Colin, is it? Sam Walsh, out of the London depot. I was just on my way out when the alarm went off.

"We've had problems in our own data center with bad smoke sensors giving false positives, so I thought I'd check the ones in your subfloor while I was here. I was just about to start when you got back." He nodded towards the bank of racks he'd been behind. "Now you're back, with your crew, I can leave the details to you. Best of the day to you." He gave what he hoped was his best 'charmer' smile and moved towards the door.

"Just a moment... Sam?" Colin said. Sam stopped, tried hard not to sweat, then turned calmly around. "I don't know what kind of setup you've got in London" Colin continued, "but there's quite a few sensors in and around this room. Think you could lend us a hand, seeing as how you were going to start checking them anyway?"

Sam was so relieved, he nearly fainted on the spot. "Wish I could" he said, pulling open the door. "But I'm running late getting back as it is. Top of the day to you!"

Colin stared at the door, frowning, for several seconds after it had snapped closed. "Dennis" he called to one of the programmers, without moving an inch, "break out the smoke sensor test kits. You and Janet start with the outer units, then work your way in here. Fergie, you and Simon check the servers in racks 4A through 4E, make sure there's nothing dodgy going on."

Fergie and the others raced off as though they'd been hit with cattle prods. Simon, who had been around the IT world nearly as long as Colin, hesitated a moment, then said softly: "Your spidey-sense bugging you, boss?"

For answer, Colin stepped over to a wall phone, scooped up the handset, and dialed four digits. "If you have to ask" he replied, a humorless smile twitching his lips, "I think you know the answer" "Hello, Ben? Colin here... no, everything looks fine on the hardware side, but we may have a situation. Would you check the access log for our door for the last hour, please? Yes, I'll hold..."

Sam started running as soon as he was in the stairwell and out of immediate sight. He'd have to have been dead to miss the body language radiating off the IT supervisor... Kevin? No, Colin. That was it.

\_Not that it matters now\_ he thought, as he reached the ground level and started up the next flight. His breath was starting to come in gasps; no matter the risk, he'd have to take a moment to rest if he expected to clear out without arousing any more suspicion than he already had. \_If I've got five minutes, it'll be a miracle!\_

He stopped at the second floor, panting. \_I really need to work out more\_ he thought, disgustedly. \_Time was I could do six flights without breaking a sweat...\_

The door to the main library reading room, one floor above, opened with a metallic bang. The sound of heavy boots descending the stairs echoed off the hard concrete walls, seconds before a face as black as midnight looked over the railing from above, spotted Sam and bellowed: "Security! Put your hands on your head, step slowly away from the rail, then hold still!" The demand was promptly backed up by the muzzle of the guard's Glock.

\_Dammitall!\_ Thought Sam, as he followed the instructions and stood motionless in the middle of the landing. He tilted his eyes down, measuring the distance to the first floor and emergency exit, wondering if he could jump the rail...

The exit door banged open and a second guard stepped through, a burly blond with his Glock drawn and leveled. "Kano, you good?" He called,

in a classic Texan drawl.

The first guard grinned widely, his teeth blazing white against his face. "More than good, \_mtani\_" he replied. \_Sam thought his accent was either Tanzanian or Kenyan. "I think we have caught ourselves a nice \_tapeli\_ today!"

The two converged on him. Sam was smart enough to know when his options were exhausted; one guard, he might have been able to bamboozle. With two, he'd be stunned "or worse" before he could so much as twitch. He grunted in frustration. \_So damn close...!\_

A series of muted thunking sounds emerged from near the third-floor door. Sam glanced up, along with the guards, and caught a glimpse of multicolored streaks bouncing every which way. One streak ricocheted off the metal rail with a muffled bong like an asthmatic church bell, caromed off the wall farther down the stairwell with another solid-sounding \_thunk\_

and connected solidly with the Texan guard's nose. He yelped in surprise, and staggered back, one hand across his face. The first guard, by now recovered from his own surprise, swung around and aimed his weapon back through the access door. Sam heard a soft puffing noise, like a soda bottle being opened.

His jaw dropped as the first guard collapsed. An instant later, the blue glare of a stun charge zipped upward past his head. It expended itself against the third floor door frame in a series of buzzing, snapping arcs like a Jacobs Ladder gone insane. From below, the second guard was all but shouting into his radio: "Code five, officer down, west stairwell, main archives, shots fired. Get us some backup, dammit...!"

A shadowy shape appeared in the third floor doorway. All Sam could see was a dark, hooded silhouette. "Move it, mister!" A voice yelled. It sounded familiar.

The vet was not inclined to argue. He moved, pounding up the rest of the stairs with newfound energy. Behind him, the guard yelled at both of them to stop; he emphasized the demand with another stun charge which left Sam's right shoulder tingling with the near miss.

"Nice reflexes," his mysterious rescuer commented, without looking around, as they fled down a service corridor. All Sam could see was a short figure in Ranger blue, the hood of his jacket secured firmly over his head. "If you hadn't ducked when you did, we'd both be cooling our heels in the local lock-up."

\_Where\_ had he heard that voice?! "Thanks" Sam panted. "The other guard... you didn't..."

"Knocked out only" came the prompt reply. "Airgun. Sedative. He'll wake up in a couple of hours, feeling like he's been on a weekend bender at the officer's club, but he'll be fine."

One fire door and a short trot later, they were in the men's room Sam had left earlier. The vet leaned against the wall, trying to catch his breath. "Don't get too comfortable" the other said, as he opened the door just far enough to watch the corridor. "You've got, maybe, a couple of minutes before this place is crawling with angry



security."

Sam nodded, took another half-minute, then reached into the janitor's closet for his bag and boots. He slipped into one of the stalls and changed, quickly. The IT Services shirt, casual shoes, denims and faux glasses all went down the recycling chute.

He was just running a comb through his hair when he heard loud voices and heavy footsteps outside. With a silent prayer neither guard had gotten a good look at him, Sam stepped out of the stall and slung his pack over his shoulder. He was now clad, the same as his rescuer, in standard Ranger work blues, though minus the full gunbelt: The only personnel authorized to carry weapons within the archives were Security.

His rescuer turned around, and Sam got his first good look. He froze in place, fighting a feeling like he'd been sucker-punched, then gasped; \_"Gerry?!"\_

His friend grinned, pulled his hood down, and started running his own comb through glossy black hair. "Nice to see you, too, Sam" he said, as casually as if they'd just gotten off work and were going out for dinner.

Before Sam could do more than work his jaw a couple of times, the main door was pushed open to reveal a stern-faced security guard, chevrons decorating both sleeves. He took in the two Rangers and the rest of the room in one swift glance, then stepped inside. They could both see another guard in the corridor, H&K MP-8 in hand, looking very tense indeed.

"Gentlemen" the officer said, in clipped tones a Marine drill instructor would have envied. "Is there anyone else in here with you?"

Sam and Gerry glanced at each other, then shook their heads. "We were just cleaning up before leaving, sir" Gerry said.

Sam spoke up, almost without thinking. "One young fellow did lean his head in about five minutes ago" he said, managing to put a look of profound confusion on his face. "Gray shirt, glasses, looked like he'd been running all day. Took one look at us, then bolted back out as if he had a banshee on his heels. I think he went towards the reading room."

The sergeant turned and snapped orders at his companion. "Morton, you heard: Get the word out! I want this building checked from roof to foundation. Scram!"

Morton scrambled. The sergeant turned back to them, one hand extended. "We may have had a security breach, gentlemen. May I see your badges, please?"

Both Rangers handed over their ID cases without any hesitation. Sam tried hard not to fidget as the officer's gaze flipped between the photo on Sam's commission card and his current appearance. "Did you do something with your hair, Ranger Shay?"

Sam swallowed. "Yes, sir" he replied, jerking a thumb towards Gerry. "I... lost a bet. To him."

Gerry developed a sudden cough. The sergeant's eyebrows went up. His gaze flicked back and forth a few more times. Finally, he handed the ID's back. "I get the feeling" he said, with a ghost of a smile, "the less I know about that, the better. Good day to you both."

He turned neatly on one heel and marched out towards the reading room. Sam took a breath to speak, but let it go as Gerry held up a commanding hand. "Wait. Talk later" he mouthed.

Sam nodded, and the two walked out, occasionally dodging clusters of glowering guards. A few minutes later, they were in a maglev shuttle headed for transient parking. Sam let out a long, shaky breath as the car accelerated into a tunnel, then eyed his friend.

"Thanks for the help" he said. "Now, would you mind telling me where in Saint Blaise's back yard you've been?! And, for that matter, what you're doing here?"

Gerry chuckled. "Same as you, Sam. Research. This may surprise you, but I think we've been working towards the same goal from different directions. Congrats on getting your memory back, by the way."

The vet grimaced. "Thanks, I think. Seems to have gotten me nothing but a "WHAT?!"

This time, Gerry laughed out loud. Sam felt like smacking him, then relaxed as his friend got his mirth under control. "Easy, Sam" he said, holding up one hand. "It wasn't hard to figure out. You wouldn't have come here unless you wanted to research something without leaving a trace on your terminal at Alladale. The only major event I can think of which qualifies for that kind of attention is your alleged crash.

"As for where I've been, let's call it 'special assignment.' I can't tell you a "

Sam rolled his eyes. "Any more at the moment" he finished. "Saint Blaise's Bloomers, Gerry, do you have any idea how sick I am of hearing that line? Why even bother?!" He started pacing back and forth, waving his hands for emphasis.

"Listen to yourself! You disappear under circumstances which could only be called 'unsettling' at best, not a word to Dash, myself, or the rest of the unit! Then you show up a month or so later, doing some sort of mysterious 'research,' you tell me we're working on the same goal from different sides, and you don't even have the decency to tell me what the banshee-damned goal is?!"

"If I tell you, here and now, it could kill a whole lot of people I care about!" Gerry snapped back. "This isn't just about you any more, or a single illegal memory wipe. Thousands of lives are at stake, Sam, human and otherwise, all over the planet! If you're ready to stand here right now, look me straight in the eye, and tell me you're ready and willing to take full responsibility for all those lives, then I'll tell you everything."

Gerry stepped back and folded his arms across his chest, his gaze still locked with Sam's. "Be bloody damned sure about your answer!"

The look in his friend's eyes startled Sam. There was something much older, much more harsh, in that amber gaze than he'd ever seen before. Weariness, a bit of cynicism, yes, but tempered with a fierce joy, an absolute belief in the rightness of what he was doing and why — and an unquestioning willingness to fight for it.

The car started to slow. Sam sighed, and dropped his gaze. "So what now?" he asked. "Do we just part ways and pretend we never saw each other?"

Gerry's good humor returned in a flash, as the car glided to a smooth halt. "Hardly. If you'd let me finish what I was saying, before so glibly assuming my next words were going to be 'Any more at this time,' you'd have learned something. You always were the impulsive type."

Sam snorted. "This from someone who never moves slower than a startled hare?"

The doors opened, and the pair quickly made their way towards the elevators. "Touche" Gerry said. "What I was going to say" he continued, in a low voice, "is I can't tell you exactly what my assignment consists of. What I can tell you is three things.

"First: You're on the right track. Keep digging, and keep an open mind. Second: It's dangerous for us, others you've already met and care about, and a whole bunch of people you've yet to meet, if we're seen together beyond this point. Third: Don't be surprised if those above you in power cannot be trusted, but it doesn't mean everyone's your enemy, either."

Three elevators slid their doors open almost simultaneously. Gerry stepped into one, but waved Sam on to another when he attempted to follow. "We'll see each other again" Gerry said, with a cheery wave, as the doors slid closed. "Oh! And don't forget to reset your ship's entry—"

The closing doors cut off the last word. Sam grunted, then stepped into the next car. When he reached the lobby level, there was no sign of Gerry inside or on the flight line. It was raining steadily, though the wind had slackened somewhat.

A couple of wet minutes later, he was settled into his ship's cabin and bringing its systems online. As he waited for takeoff clearance, a flash of color from the document holder caught his eye. He reached over, and pulled out a slightly dog-eared travel brochure for, of all places, Trondheim.

How did this get here? he mused, flipping it open. Granted, I've never been to Trondheim, but there's not much to draw my interest...

Gerry's parting words repeated themselves, especially the chopped-off bit about 'ship's entry.' One query to the computer later, he had his answer. It took him only a moment to reset his ship's outside-entry code from the default '43210,' cursing his own stupidity the entire time.

"\_Ranger nineteen, Yorkshire tower, wind zero-eight-eight at six, gusts to fifteen, clear for liftoff. Squawk four-four-one-niner, tops eighteen hundred fifty meters. Climb at pilot's discretion, and safe flight."\_

"Nineteen, copy and thanks" Sam said, advancing the throttles.

Within minutes, he was cruising in clear sunlight, the clouds stretched out below like a gray and white patchwork carpet. He set the autopilot, and turned his attention back to the brochure. It was a typical tourist blurb, of a type which could be found at nearly any airport or hotel, hyping the supposed benefits of choosing Trondheim For Your Next Family Vacation.

Someone had circled an area about six kilometers, as the crow flies, southeast of the city, a place called 'Dragvoll.' It was at the top of a hill, just south of the town of Reppe and, from the elevation figure, high enough to have a phenomenal view of its surroundings. The area was, among other things, home to a branch campus of the University of Norway, Life Sciences department.

What intrigued Sam most, though, was not the town: It was the note which fell out of the brochure into his lap when he flipped to the last page. The handwriting carried another surprise. It was not, as he'd expected, in Gerry's elegant script, but in the somewhat rough printing of Lieutenant Dashiell!

\_Sam,\_

\_Thought you might like to visit here over the weekend. Great food, fun nightlife, and the view from the University's hill is nothing short of stunning. Great for clearing your head!\_

\_Let me know if you decide to go. I might want to tag along, and dinner's on me if I do. Think of it as a kind of sideways apology for being so anti-social the past month or so.\_

\_Safe flying,\_

\_Dash.\_

Sam's paranoia went into high gear. He leaned back in his seat, his thoughts spinning like a whirlwind. His restored memory was quite clear regarding his 'rescue' and subsequent debriefing; Dash and the Secretary had seemed very much in sync with each other.

Then again, Dash had made it a point to ask, in detail, about Skye, and had urged Sam to focus on his memories of her if nothing else. \_He knew, or suspected, what was coming. It may have been his way of warning me.\_

The thought prompted him to dig out the jump drive he'd used on the server. He docked it with his ship's computer, and started searching the contents. He nearly fainted with relief when he saw the search routines had, apparently, finished in time; among the numerous files were the raw flight recorder logs from his old ship, footage from his onboard cameras of Skye doing her 'farewell' aerobatics, and "best of all " treatment records and chart notes for Nalu and Niho, signed by Kate Ericsson.

There was only one piece missing. Though he searched the drive from end to end, there was no trace of his debriefing recording. \_Dammit! Maybe Dash kept a copy... but how do I know if he'll share it, or simply hand me off to the MP's?\_

Inspiration struck. "Computer" he said, "MEDLINE search. List all drugs used in the last ten years for human memory suppression, include experimental."

The search was quick, and the list was short: Six common, two experimental. Sam didn't recognize any of them, but this didn't bother him. Psychiatry was hardly his field. "Computer, display dosage instructions for line items one through six. Include contraindicated substances."

A few moments later, he had his answer, and he felt ashamed he'd ever doubted Dash. He cleared the results, then called Alladale Base.

"Lieutenant Dashiell's on Code Eight status, sir, same as you" the comm officer told him. "He left word he could be reached on his portable phone. I can transfer, if you'd like."

"No, thanks, I'll call him myself" Sam said, then switched off and reached for his personal phone. \_Much less likely to have ears flapping over a direct connection\_ he thought, as he dialed.

It was answered almost immediately. "Sam! How's the research going?"

He paused a moment before replying. Dash's tone was just a little \_too\_ casual. "Just fine, sir" he said, choosing his words carefully. "The line I was following opened up more questions than answers, though, and I did want to talk to you about it. Where are you?"

"U of N annex, near Dragvoll" came the airy reply. Sam's eyebrows shot up. "Why not meet me here? I think there's enough material on hand to have a good chance of answering your questions."

Sam knew a blaring hint when he heard one. He switched the phone to his left hand while his right tapped a new course into the autopilot. "Just turning that way now" he said. "ETA, about two and a half hours, so we'll have a bit of time to play tourist as well."

"Excellent. See you in a couple of hours, and you can give me a ride back to Alladale afterward. Saves me a night's layover. See you soon!"

The connection dropped. Sam didn't need to be a mind reader to know the more he could shave off his ETA, the better. He quickly climbed to an altitude reserved for long-distance flights, and opened up the throttles. His ship gave a smooth surge of acceleration, the airspeed indicator settling at 500 knots.

Just over two hours later, thanks to an unexpected tailwind, he landed at the annex under cloudy, cold weather. A familiar figure was waiting for him, clad in Ranger winter uniform with an overnight bag in one hand. "Welcome to the cool blue north!" Dash called, as Sam

started down the ladder. "Throw this in the back, would you?" He continued, holding up the bag.

Sam did so, secured the canopy, and dropped to the ground. "'Cool' is putting it mildly" he said. He pulled his hood up as a gust of wind hit. "I'd be shocked if it's a degree over six C."

"And I'd be equally shocked if we didn't see snow by tonight" Dash replied. "That's why I wanted out of here early."

They eyed each other uncertainly for a moment. Sam was startled to see prominent dark circles under Dash's eyes, as his expression flickered between relief, embarrassment and a cold anger which he'd seen only twice before, though he was fairly sure it wasn't directed at him. "Sir, with due respect" he said, carefully. "What in the Seven Hells is going on?!"

Dash snorted. "'The Time Has Come, The Walrus Said, To Talk Of Many Things'" he quoted, then shook his head. "Sorry, Sam. Lewis Carroll's always been a favorite of mine."

"Along with Kipling" Sam replied. He eyed his friend and CO closely for a moment, then said "You knew. From the moment I brought that pair of scaly menaces back, you knew all this would happen. That's why you brought down the bottle of scotch. You knew alcohol would blunt the effects of Axonase-B. You wanted me to get my memory back. Why? You ordered it wiped to begin with!"

"No!" Dash snapped. He reached up and gripped Sam firmly by both shoulders. "I did not order it, nor would I have. Ever! In fact, I tried to stop it. Messing with a man's memory is not how I operate! If you believe nothing else, believe that!"

UNEC Ranger training included in-depth techniques for seeing the 'tells' when someone was lying. Dash's dark eyes held none of them. "I believe you" Sam said, after a moment. Dash nodded his thanks, and let go of his shoulders. "So who did order it, then?"

Dashiell's eyes flashed with anger. "The Secretary himself, Sam. Subrata Gupta. Worse, I've since found out he did it on his own. No Crown Court order, not even so much as a Council directive."

Sam's jaw worked up and down as his mind tried to process this. A moment later, rage washed through him, adding a red haze to his sight. A stream of Celtic curses, as creative as they were potent, hissed out from between his clenched teeth. Dash simply stood by, waiting for the verbal storm to pass.

Pass it did, though it took two-plus minutes. "Feel better?" Dash asked, grinning slightly. "You know, I didn't think such a thing was anatomically possible for a unicorn. Unless, of course, he got some help from"

"Never mind!" Sam shot back. He took a long, shaky breath, then his eyes widened. "Wait a minute... Dash, if you didn't know Gupta had gone rogue at the time, it means you disobeyed a direct order and took one hell of a risk, by getting me tanked up..." He eyed his boss with new respect.

"Oh, meadow-muffins!" Dash snapped, his ears turning a bit redder

than normal. "Not once did the Secretary or anyone else order me not to visit a friend. I was off the clock, and what I choose to do with my off-hours is none of UNEC's business!"

Sam chuckled. "Might be more believable if you weren't grinning so much."

Whatever reply Dash might have made was abruptly cut short. Warbling sirens heralded the arrival of two white Volvo groundcars, both decked out in vivid red and blue reflective stripes, the word POLITI in bold black lettering on each side. Eye-searing red and blue LED strips flashed in their overhead light bars, bright enough to reflect clearly off the outer hull of Sam's ship, as they pulled into flanking positions and stopped.

Before either man could blink, they found themselves neatly boxed in by six troopers, weapons leveled. "Both of you, place your hands behind your heads and step slowly away from the aircar" the closest officer called, in clear English with barely a trace of accent.

"I'll handle this" Dash said, softly, as he put his hands behind his head. "Under who's authority?" He shouted, stepping forward. "We're both UNEC officers, out of Alladale Baseâ€""

Two sharp pops echoed across the field. Sam froze in horror as Dash, a look of utter astonishment on his face, collapsed to the ground. Heedless of the sudden rush of troops, Sam was beside him in an instant. "Didn't... think... go this far" Dash gasped, through clenched teeth.

"Don't try to talk!" Sam said, as he unzipped Dash's jacket. He winced at the sight of the dark stain spreading rapidly over his friend's shirt, then tried to put on a brave front. "The nearest hospital's just down the hill" he said. "We'll get you there in two shakes..."

A ghost of a smile flickered across Dash's face, even as the light started fading from his eyes. Suddenly, one arm reached up and gripped Sam's shoulder like a vise. "Zero-zero-two-zero" Dash whispered, urgently. "Article fourteen..."

The light went out. Dash's hand dropped limply to the ground as his entire body slumped. Strong hands suddenly gripped Sam's shoulders from behind, and pulled. He started to resist, then stopped as he felt the barrel of a gun against his neck. He turned slowly to face the trooper who had spoken first, a stocky blond man with sergeant's stripes on his epaulets. "We'll take care of him, Ranger Shay" he said, calmly. "Come with me, please. Secretary Gupta's orders."

\_Note to self\_ Sam thought, bitterly, as he was led away. \_When on Code Eight, in the future, always carry a backup weapon!\_ He let his fury build for a few moments, then glanced back at his captor. "And was it also Secretary Gupta's orders to kill my commander in cold blood? He was unarmed, dammitall!"

"You know better, sir" the sergeant replied, his tone utterly calm. "The officer who fired did so without authorization. He will be disciplined."

Sam snorted, but said nothing more. He'd met many different police and soldiers over the years, undercover and uniformed alike, along with the civilians who aided them in supporting roles. No matter what a person did in such an environment, there were tiny changes which crept into their body language: How they carried themselves, what they carried, how they looked at their surroundings, how they spoke and acted; all were 'tells' which could identify their true role, no matter how they might try to hide it.

As they reached the nearer of the two groundcars, Sam suddenly faced the trooper and said "You know, it's interesting... I thought the only time Norway's police carried anything but stunners was when they were on anti-terrorism missions."

He was rewarded by a brief widening of the sergeant's eyes. "You're not Norwegian police" he continued. It was not a question. "I'd guess UN Special Forces."

The ersatz sergeant shrugged. "You're very observant, Ranger Shay" he replied, in the same dead-calm tone. "Not that it matters, now." He opened the rear door. "Into the car, please. Watch your head."

Sam hesitated. The barrel of what he belatedly recognized as a nine-millimeter semiautomatic pistol never wavered, and the cold wind took on an eerie rising whistle like a demented flute.

Something bright, blue, and fast struck the second groundcar. It blew apart, scattering the other troopers and knocking Sam flat on his back. For a moment, he simply lay where he'd fallen, dazed by the blast, wondering if the black shape which was now just a speck against the clouds had been an attack drone...

Black shape?!\_

Instinct drove him before conscious thought could catch up. He struggled to his feet, wincing at a sharp pain across his forehead, then sprinted as best as he could for his ship and swarmed up the ladder. He risked a quick glance back as he keyed in his entry code.

It was a scene straight out of an old air-disaster movie. The edge of the field where the faux police had parked was swarming with people sporting the University's logo, trying to get a leg up on the fiercely-burning wreck. More sirens wailed in the distance as medical crews and " Sam hoped " the real Norway Police converged on the scene.

The canopy locks clunked open, the dome slid back. Sam climbed up the last step, ready to drop into his seat " and froze at the sight of a body, covered head to foot by a black tarp. He gulped, fighting down a mix of nausea and rage. Dash...\_

Then he spotted something else: A stocky figure, face rendered unrecognizable by the large piece of metal shrapnel which had buried itself in his skull, right between the eyes. Even through the singe and blood, Sam could tell the fellow had been blond.

"You... stop!" Someone yelled. He glanced hurriedly around and spotted one of the faux troopers staggering towards him, trying to



keep his pistol steady.

"T igh tarraing ar elf!" Sam yelled back as he dropped into his seat, hands flying over the controls. He winced as a couple of bullets ricocheted harmlessly off the outer hull.

Seconds later, he was in the air, turbines roaring as he put his ship into a near-vertical climb. He clenched his eyes shut as the G-force pushed him back into his seat, trying to make sense of what had just happened. He shivered as the whole scene replayed itself, repeatedly, in his head. The look of utter surprise on Dash's face had been the worst part.

He'd been right to wear such a look. Lethal force was rarely used these days, outside of the military, thanks to the development of directed-energy stunners. \_This means\_ he thought, as a chill went down his spine, \_Dash knew more than he had a chance to tell me, and Gupta wanted him dead from the start because of it!\_

Feelings of betrayal, indecision, and isolation washed over him. It was clear, now, that UNEC's problems went all the way to the top. \_I can't go back to Alladale, and just pretend nothing's happened. Even if Gupta doesn't want me dead, he'll be waiting with brain-bleach in hand.\_

His ship suddenly stopped its headlong rush for height, the G-force easing off as the craft leveled out. A two-tone chime sounded, and the computer's voice announced: \_"Warning: Service ceiling reached, position hold engaged."\_

Startled, Sam checked the altimeter: 12,500 meters, and holding. His radar showed nothing else in the area for at least a hundred kilometers, and the only thing visible at this altitude was clear sky. He took a long, shuddering breath and cradled his face in both hands. For the moment, he was as safe as he was likely to get, though he wished for radar invisibility now more than ever.

He shoved the thought aside, and tried to focus on his options. It wasn't easy; the sight of Dash's face, as his life drained away, haunted his vision. This, too, got pushed aside with some effort. \_He was never big on pity\_ Sam thought. \_The last thing he'd want me to do is wallow in it while I sit around making a target of myself!\_

Sam knew if Gupta was operating on his own, he would be keeping it as undercover as possible. \_He's probably got his own core of loyal little sycophants among the Guard\_ he thought, disgustedly. \_It doesn't matter whether this attempt went bad â€" he'll just try again, and he'll \_keep\_ trying, probably until he can make it look like a nice accident!\_

Two things came out of this train of thought, and both shocked Sam to his core: First, he was truly a fugitive now. It would be trivial for someone as highly placed as Gupta to alter the facts, make it look like Sam had been the murderer.

Second: No matter what he did, his career in UNEC was effectively over. Even if he could, somehow, cast doubt on the web of lies Gupta would likely spin with all the tools at his disposal, there would still be enough suspicion to make sure of a dishonorable discharge.

\_No one would ever hire so much as a vet tech with that kind of background\_ he thought, bitterly.

One option was to, simply, disappear. Even in a 'wired world,' he had learned plenty of ways to simply drop off the grid and vanish into the noise, as it were. His classes at Tesla's Basement had been nothing if not thorough.

He grumbled in frustration. \_Sure. I can save myself. I can abandon everything I've ever known, fake my death, and vanish. I can never see Paddy or any of the family again, and I'll have to forget about the dragons, give up vet medicine and learn a new trade. \_He snorted. \_I'm sure I can find a computer store which needs good tech support people!\_

His thoughts calmed, slowly. The ghostly image of a blue-scaled face, eyes bugging comically at him, drifted up out of his memory, bringing seven words with it: \_Nalu find you, now you find us!\_

Something else came out of the calm as well. Suddenly, Dash's last words made complete sense. On the one hand, the idea was nearly as bad as simply dropping out of existence; assuming he could get in, he might never be able to leave without inviting sudden death.

On the other, it wasn't a new idea. It was one borne of people throughout history who had done nothing more than speak their minds against evil and injustice, often to the embarrassment (or even overthrow) of those in power. He was nearly certain he'd be among friends, human and otherwise, some of whom just might be able to pull the right strings at the right time...

The decision was made for him as his radar beeped an alert: Three aircraft were closing on his position at Mach two. His computer promptly identified them as RAF Viper-class fighters, sporting ID codes from Yorkshire\_. \_An instant later, an unfamiliar male voice with a well-cultured British accent sounded in his headset.

"\_Ranger Nineteen, this is Paladin One, do you copy?" \_

Suddenly, the utter absurdity of the entire situation hit Sam full-force. All his fear vanished like so many startled cats, leaving cool determination in its wake. Acting as though he had not a care in the world, he wheeled his ship around to a southwest heading and throttled up to a leisurely 200 knots. "Paladin One, Ranger Nineteen, copy you five by. What can I do for the RAF this fine day?"

The reply fairly dripped confidence. Sam wasn't surprised. \_One\_ Viper-class craft carried enough weaponry and ECM to take out anything up to and including an old-style aircraft carrier.

"\_Ranger Nineteen, this is Paladin One, \_Group Captain Travis Alden commanding. By order of the Secretary-General of the UN, the Honorable Subrata Gupta, you are hereby relieved of duty. You are further ordered to consider yourself under arrest, and you are to accompany us to Yorkshire Base. Please acknowledge."\_

Sam nearly choked at the title. He fought down a burst of anger, and keyed his transmitter. "'Honorable,' Group Captain?" He replied, in tones of icy calm. "Oh, I could tell you some stories about Secretary Gupta, none of which are anything close to 'honorable.' Yes, indeed I

could."

As he spoke, he started a slow descent, still holding his course. One hand slid aside the guard cover over two red-and-black striped rocker switches. Despite their relatively neat installation, even a junior mechanic would have questioned if they were standard equipment.

They weren't. Sam had, with Jarod's help, secretly installed them and the equipment they controlled shortly after their fishing trip.

Alden's reply had all the personality of a depressed undertaker. \_"You will have ample opportunity to speak at your trial, Ranger Shay. The charges against you are numerous, with treason topping the list. There is also dereliction of duty, impersonation, sabotage, theft of classified data... do I need to continue?"\_

Sam's thoughts raced. The fact they weren't coming in shooting argued strongly for the idea Gupta wanted him alive. This further implied he still had something the Secretary wanted, though he couldn't imagine what it might be. His debriefing recording hadn't been among the data he'd recoveredâ€"

Multiple turbines thundered from outside as the three fighters settled into a triangle formation behind him. Sam cranked his head around to take a look. As he did, he also caught sight of a Navy blue overnight bag lying on the rear floor, the late afternoon sunlight sparking iridescent reflections off something attached to the main zipper.

Puzzled, he looked closer. Tucked neatly inside a decorative key fob was an unlabeled Micro-OD memory card.

Alden's voice broke into his thoughts again. \_"You're doing fine, sir. Maintain your current course, descend and maintain three thousand fifty meters. Upon reaching, throttle up to four hundred fifty knots. There's no reason to drag this out any longer than necessary."\_

"Nineteen, copy" Sam replied. "And you're absolutely right, Group Captain" he added to himself, as his attention darted between the altimeter and the two switches. "No reason at all..."

Minutes and height ticked away, the gray carpet of clouds growing closer and more prominent by the second. Sam started to sweat; the maneuver he had in mind would either buy him precious time to get away, or leave him walking on clouds. \_Four thousand... three-eighty... three-sixty...\_

He pressed the switches. On his upper hull, two half-meter wide vents flipped open, discharging a dense cloud of multicolored flakes into his slipstream. There was no way the fighters could avoid passing through the artificial cloud.

The results exceeded Sam's wildest hopes. The two ships on either side of him shuddered â€" just before whipping around in uncontrolled wing-overs, smoke and debris streaming from their turbine exhausts! Within moments, they were spiraling down through the clouds, their pilots concentrating fully on emergency landings.

His luck didn't hold where the third ship, at the top of the triangle, was concerned. Alden Sam thought, grimly, as he cut both lift and thrust to zero and slammed open his spoilers. The Group Captain's ship shot by just overhead, buffeting Sam's craft in its wake. His radio came alive with Alden's voice, tight with surprised rage: "What in bloody hell was that?! WHAT DID YOU DO?!"

"Nothing they can't recover from" Sam said, airily, as his ship continued its free-fall tumble, the altimeter counting down at a frightening pace.

"Tell me something, Group Captain. What do you think happens to a well-balanced precision machine, like a thrust turbine, when it ingests a few thousand low-density polyresin flakes? Why, they'd soften up right away in the first stage, then glue themselves all over the inner blades as they cooled. It'd throw the rotor balance all to hell and back again, so it would, and when that rotor's spinning at five-plus figures of RPM, well..."

Silence, broken only by the whistle of wind. Then: "You're dead, Shay!"

"Have to catch me first!" Sam shot back as, with a silent prayer, he shoved the lift and thrust throttles forward and hauled back on the stick. His ship shook like a leaf in a hurricane, his vision blurred as the G-forces drained blood from his head, structural and engine alarms blared

"And then he was thundering along, barely eight meters above the treetops, rain lashing his canopy and throwing up a rooster-tail of spray in his wake. He had just finished setting his transponder to 0020, and was dialing in the contact frequency for Årland Air Base, when his EM detector shrilled a warning. He flipped his ship onto its edge by reflex, barely avoiding the blue-white ball lightning of an EMP charge. He's faster, but I can maneuver better" Sam thought as he keyed his transmitter once again.

"Årland Center, UNEC Ranger Alpha Lima Nineteen, Sam Shay, declaring an emergency. I'm on approach to FWA Seven-Golf-Three, squawking zero-zero-two-zero. Under Article Fourteen of the UDHR, I request asylum"

The weapons-lock warning shrilled. Sam banked sharply, but not quick enough. His ship bucked and stressed metal shrieked as Alden's laser struck a glancing blow. "Warning" the computer spoke. "Outer hull breach, area VA-2. Secondary GNSS signal loss."

Sam slammed a palm down on the audio cutout. "Thanks for the timely warning, you overpowered vacuum cleaner!" He shouted, then continued on his radio: "Årland, be advised: I am being fired upon by the RAF! Do you copy?! Request immediate asylum and any assistance you can render!"

Even as he spoke, his ship's computer was doing its best in the way of evasive action. Sam's stomach lurched as his craft suddenly spun 360 degrees on its long axis, then went into an inverted loop. Behind him, the top of a tall pine tree burst into flames from a second laser bolt. Suddenly, a deep resonant voice filled his headphones.

"\_UNEC Ranger Nineteen, Å~rland Center. Emergency acknowledged, radar contact at eighty kilometers south-southwest of Bangsund. Turn left heading zero-two-five, clear to enter seven-golf-three at pilot's discretion. Stand by for the base commandant."\_

Sam quickly adjusted his course, chafing at the delay, and pushed the thrust throttle full forward. His ship surged ahead " then started vibrating in metallic spasms. \_Must be the hole he shot in the hull\_ he thought, grimly. His radar showed Alden's Viper a half-kilometer behind him, shadowing his every move.

The problem was none of Sam's weaponry was designed to fire rearward, except for the now-depleted 'stop-cloud.'

Alden's voice crackled in his headset: \_"You can run, but you can't hide, Shay. Three more Vipers are already en route. One way or another, you're coming back with us. Whether it's on your own power, or in the back of a Med-Evac ship, is entirely up to you. Why not make it easy on us all, and turn around? Here's something which should help."\_

Two roiling blue spheroids shot from the Viper's nose. Sam reflexively banked away, as they passed by close enough to light up the cabin. \_"Turn back to course two-six-zero now, or the next one goes straight up your tailpipes"\_ Alden snapped. \_"You have ten seconds to decide!"\_

Sam glanced at the GPS display. He was still twenty-five kilometers out of Bangsund, thirty-five from the wilderness area border. Ten seconds wouldn't get him half that distance. \_Where in blazes is Å~rland's CO?!"\_

Inspiration struck like the proverbial lightning bolt. He might not be anywhere near Alden's equal in terms of air combat training, but he had one advantage the fighter pilot didn't know about. Given a little luck, it just might be enough.

Alternatively, it might turn his ship into scrap metal.

Sam keyed his transmitter as he started a standard-rate turn to the right. "All right, Alden, you win" he said, putting as much resignation into his voice as he could. "Turning about now..."

"\_Smart move"\_ the officer replied. Sam thought he sounded vaguely disappointed. \_"But I still owe you for the two you knocked down. Don't forget that. I certainly won't!"\_

Sam didn't reply. He was too busy watching his heading. He started to level out as the numbers reached 255 "

Then, with a crazy twist of throttles and joystick, he threw his ship into an end-over-end flip-and-roll, just like the one Skye had unexpectedly demonstrated for him one afternoon long, long ago. \_And she said she learned it from Toothless..."\_

His ship was quick to complain, in its own way, that it was no Night Fury. Structural alarms honked, the entire craft vibrated like a well-struck gong, and the computer practically yelled at him:

\_ "Warning! TQ generator tolerance critically violated, abort maneuver! " \_

"Not... yet...!" Sam gritted, nervous sweat streaking down his forehead, as he fought the controls to roll the ship right side up again hopefully in time to

Yes! He was now front-broadside to Alden's Viper, his momentum literally causing his own ship to fly backwards just long enough for the sweet tone of laser lock-on to sound in his headphones.

He fired.

An eye-searing spot of green appeared near the curve of Alden's port turbine housing. A heartbeat later, the Group Captain's ship was descending in a slow spiral, a corkscrew of black smoke and multicolored sparks trailing behind it. \_Wow!\_ Sam thought, as he brought his own ship around and took up his original north-northwest heading. \_I can't believe that worked! I must have gotten one of his lift coils...\_

Before elation had time to set in, his radar hooted a warning. Just as Alden had promised, three more Viper craft were closing fast. "Not this time!" He muttered, as he pushed his thrust levers hard forward, past the detent and into redline.

The turbines howled, and his ship started an unnerving, steady vibration, punctuated by random metallic groans. He kept one eye fixed to the drive's internal temperature gauge, which was just starting to edge into the yellow. \_Nothing to lose\_ Sam thought. \_Even if I have to bail, I may get far enough to eject in the right spot. I just hope the magnetic bearings hold together...\_

As if on cue, his radio came to life once again. The voice was as strong and confident as it was feminine. \_"UNEC Ranger Nineteen, this is Colonel Renata van Huse, commanding officer, Årland Airbase. Provisional asylum is granted, and you are cleared to land within seven-golf-three. Do you still require assistance? We have only your own craft on radar at this time." \_

\_Saint Blaise be praised!\_ "Årland Base, Ranger Nineteen. That's affirmative on assistance! I have three RAF Vipers on my tail, closing fast. You'll probably pick them up momentarily. I'm currently running on full emergency thrust, turbines at one hundred fifteen percent." He took a deep breath, then continued: "Thank you, Colonel, no matter what happens!"

"\_Thanks can wait" \_came the firm reply. \_"Please focus on getting yourself down, safely. Assistance is already en route, we will see you soon. Årland out." \_

Six Vipers in tight formation zoomed past Sam thirty seconds later, giving him a bad moment until he saw their markings were Norwegian, not RAF. The fact they were following his back trail provided further reassurance. He suddenly felt giddy from all the adrenaline his body had been producing, enough so that he didn't immediately notice a rarely-heard alarm. Fortunately, the computer had something to say about it: \_"Warning: Primary fuel cell pressure breach. Estimate two minutes power remaining." \_

Sam gaped at the rapidly-dropping gauge for a moment, then cut loose an oath which would have startled a longshoreman. Hastily, he throttled back the thrusters and started shutting down everything he could and still fly. "Ãrland Base, Ranger Nineteen. I have a fuel cell breach, and am losing power..."

His entire panel chose that moment to go dark in a shower of sparks. The cabin glowed a soft red as battery-powered emergency lights cut in. The overworked turbines whined down, and the ship dropped precipitously as the TQ field died. A moment later, a whining noise issued from under the floor, felt as well as heard, and a bright yellow light went on next to the joystick. In the same instant, the ship bucked, its descent slowing.

Emergency glide vanes, their control surfaces powered by a much smaller fuel cell than the mains used. Sam grabbed for the joystick, still muttering an extensive litany of curses in both Celtic and Norse, and tried to stabilize the ship's awkward glide. Oh, sure, he'd practiced this kind of 'dead stick' landing plenty of times â€" in the simulator.

The ship's fall slowed significantly, though the craft pitched about in the uncertain winds. Barely visible ahead, in the fading daylight, Sam could just make out a spit of forested land jutting into the waterway he was crossing. Had this been summer, he'd have considered ditching to be a safer choice. However, a glance at the outside temperature gauge squashed that idea. If the air was only four C, he didn't want to think about what the ocean was down to!

He tried tacking against the wind as his ship sank lower, his eyes flicking rapidly between the pressure altimeter and the strip of land. It was going to be closeâ€"

It was. For one horrible moment, he thought he'd have to ditch after all, as the ship bounced off the ocean's surface. Saint Blaise must have intervened, for the bounce sent the crippled craft back up just high enough to catch an errant gust. The playful wind tossed the craft up â€" and then, as suddenly, dropped it onto solid ground. From eight meters.

The impact nearly buckled the starboard landing strut. As it was, the ship's tail slewed around and slammed into a pine tree with a resounding CRACK! Sam's safety harness was all that saved him from a concussion as the ship finally came to a stop. For nearly five minutes, all he could do was sit perfectly still, marveling at his luck and not quite able to believe he was still in one piece. Finally, he managed to unstrap himself and fumbled for the manual canopy release, shoving the stubborn plexalloy dome back into its niche.

Fresh air flooded in, heavy with humidity and scented with pine, salt water, decaying leaves, moss, and all the other smells of a northern forest in early winter. Cold it was, yes, cold enough to turn his cheeks pink and frost his breath, but blessedly so after the stench of overloaded engines and fried circuitry.

He raised his head, listening, looking around. His ship ticked and hissed as its structure cooled. Water lapped gently against the shore... clearly, this beach wasn't facing open ocean, as the 'waves' were scarcely more than oversize ripples. Wind rushed and rustled

through the trees, blowing drifts of cool mist against his face. Looking up, he could see the cloud cover just starting to break, stars shining through the gaps like backlit diamonds against black velvet.

The gaps widened as he watched and the drizzle tapered off to nothing. Then, as if a giant hand had impatiently cast them aside, the clouds parted. The land and sea suddenly sparkled under the ethereal glow of a full and brilliant moon. "Whoa" Sam muttered, with a smile. "Nice timing!"

Carefully, wincing at bruises and scrapes he hadn't known were there, he reached into the back seat for his jacket. As he pulled it on, the bulk of Dash's overnight bag, now somewhat the worse for wear, caught his eye. His breath caught in his throat; had the chip survived? He grabbed the bag, pulled it upright, checked the zipper â€" yes! The key fob, with its precious silicate cargo, was still there.

He detached it and tucked it carefully into the breast pocket of his flight suit, making sure to close and secure the zippered flap. Pulling on his jacket, he clambered wearily to the ground. A faint, persistent hiss drew his attention to his ship's underside, near the main landing struts. Examining the spot with a flashlight, he found a neat three-centimeter hole, blackened around the edges. A small circle of blackened hull metal, riddled with tiny holes, still clung to the inside edge of the puncture.

Sam didn't need his Ranger training to recognize a partial laser strike. "Bastard must have tagged me at the same time I got him" he muttered. Abruptly, full realization of what could have happened hit. His knees turned to rubber and he slumped to the ground, hands over his face.

A laser needed time to burn through any surface. Aircar hulls were no exception. Any surface hit by a weapons-class laser would get very hot, very quickly, especially titanium alloy. This particular shot had struck practically in the middle of his craft's primary hydrogen fuel cell. If it had stayed on the spot long enough to fully breach the cell, and deliver enough heat as the escaping hydrogen and outside air combined...

Breathe, Shay, just breathe! He told himself, firmly. In, out, in, out, one, two... that's it... you're still alive, and you're safe.\_

Slowly, he stood up again, brushing absently at the debris clinging to the seat of his jumpsuit. Good thing it's water-repellent he mused.

Sam nearly jumped out of said water-repellent suit as something scrabbled across the top of his ship, chittering like an excited squirrel. Before he recovered enough to look, it was gone. "What theâ€" "

Something landed heavily on his back. He yelped, spun frantically in place for a moment, then found himself gazing into a pair of wide amber eyes framed in a rounded, blue-scaled face. Those eyes fairly shone with mischief and humor, as two words echoed in his mind: Found us!



"Nalu! You little demon!" Sam cried, reaching up to scratch the dragon's neck. "You gave me quite a turnâ€œ"

He grunted as another familiar shape, green with pale-gold eyes, slammed into his front, almost hard enough to knock him over. She clung to his jumpsuit, chirping excitedly. "Niho! Saint Blaise Above, don't crash into me like that..."

They both chirped, airily, and pressed against him. Their combined purrs nearly rattled his teeth. "Well" Sam said, as he welcomed the pair with more caresses and scratching. "I guess it isn't \_that\_ much of a problem." He had to keep blinking to clear his vision. Something seemed to be making his eyes water more than normal.

Suddenly, the forest surrounding the tiny beach was alive with rustling, footsteps, flashlight beams, voices calling to each other, and assorted hisses and grunts. A half-dozen people emerged from the tree line, dressed in variations of rough-hewn cloth and leather. Some bore hand-worked decorations of metal and polished wood. One man turned back towards the forest, his voice rising in a shout. "They're here! All three!"

Sam blinked. The yell had not been in English, but Old Norse. An answering shout, this one clearly female, responded. Moments later, another familiar figure walked out from the tree line. She grinned impudently at him, moonlight glinting off her brilliant red hair. "Doctor Shay! What took you so long?"

He gasped. "Doctor Ericsson?!"

"Kate, to my friends" she said, still grinning. "And I'd certainly like to count you among them, if you don't mind."

"As would I" said a new voice. It was also feminine, but very deep, nearly into the baritone range. It bore an odd resonance Sam had never heard before, the 'S' sounds being drawn out in short hisses, and it came â€œ from above his head?!

He looked up. His jaw dropped, and he lost a few kilos as Nalu and Niho quietly took themselves elsewhere. A long, black shape, the moonlight bringing out a pattern of charcoal colored rosettes on the mid-body and wings, glided easily down over the trees and landed precisely in front of him. Silvery-gray eyes, full of intelligence and power, studied him intently.

"Ssam Sshay" the Night Fury said, in clear English. "Welcome to New Berk. We have much to disscuss, ssince I believe you knew my ancesstor."

For only the second time in his life, Sam fainted.

## 14. Chapter 14

\_My thanks to all who have 'Favorited' and otherwise followed the story. I'm glad I've been able to keep your interest. This is, as some might have guessed, my first attempt at "public" publishing and I could not be happier with the results!  
><em>

\_As the schedule stands now, barring complications, the final chapter will be posted on Friday, Sep. 25th. Chapter 16 contains a brief epilogue and afterword, as well as the last of the story. I'm not that good at writing conflict, so I hope I don't disappoint anyone.

><em>

\_Happy reading!\_

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 14\*\***

"\_I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I need to be."\_

(Douglas Adams)

It had been a long time since Sam had seen his brother's tavern this crowded. The fact not all of the patrons were human only added to the festive atmosphere. He cast a glance around the warmly-lit room, his gaze lingering on a pair of brightly-colored Nadders. One was cobalt blue with yellow highlights, the other coppery red, with Navy-blue stripes forming a raccoon-like mask across its face. They were giving their human companions a serious run for their money at an oversize dartboard.

As he watched, one of the humans managed to sink a trio of darts in a tight cluster near the center of the board with three quick throws. He grinned broadly, raised his mug in ironic salute to the blue Nadder, and said "Top that one, scaly!" His voice held a hint of Texas twang which was a good match for his denim jeans, plaid shirt and well-worn boots.

The dragon let loose a hissing chuckle. "Gladly, ssmooth-sskin" came the reply, in a clear feminine tone. "Firsst, though, a ssmall detail."

The dragon turned around so her back was towards the board and raised her tail. Tiny points of light glinted off the slender needle-sharp spines. "Paddy" she called, "would you aid me, please?"

His brother lumbered into view, grinning. Sam watched in growing disbelief as the Nadder rested her head on the bar and closed her eyes. He blinked in surprise as Paddy carefully covered each eye with a ham-like hand. "No way!" he gasped.

Evidently, many of the other humans agreed. There was a sudden rush of movement as a broad path was cleared between the dragon's well-armed backside and the dartboard. An expectant hush descended on the crowd, broken only by an occasional cough and mutters of disbelief. Somewhere in the background, a drum roll started.

"Never challenge a Nadder where ssharp objectss are concerned" came another voice, directly across from him. Startled, he turned back and found a Night Fury seated " or crouched, it was hard to tell " on the other side of his table. Silvery eyes full of amusement met his, over an old-style wooden bowl filled with something golden-brown, steaming, and smelling of honey and alcohol in equal measure. "Few have bessted Ssaffyre's sskill, evenn among dragonss."

Sam nodded absently, his attention returning to the blindfolded Saffyre. Suddenly, her tail whistled through the air. Two of the three darts the Texan had lodged in the board were split neatly down the middle. The third fell to the ground, intact but knocked out of its hole by the Nadder's third quill.

The drum roll ended in a rim-shot. Astonished gasps filled the room as Saffyre stood up, opened her eyes, and trotted over to the board. A disappointed snort sounded as she noted the errant dart. "Sshardss" she hissed. "Misssed one."

Applause thundered through the room. Even the Texan was joining in. Far from dying down, the sound kept building. Sam wondered how even one of Paddy's legendary crowds could keep clapping this loud and long as the sound deepened into a boom which shook the now-roofless walls. Rain began pattering down, though he stayed perfectly dry. "Wait!" He yelled as he stood up, the scene dissolving like a watercolor. "I wasn't done...!"

\_No, you're not \_said a Voice, from all around him. \_That's why you need to wake up. You've got a lot of work to do!\_

Thunder boomed again. Sam came abruptly awake, his heart racing. He glanced around, completely disoriented. \_Where in blazes...?!\_

He sat up, wincing as sparks of pain rushed through his right shoulder and arm, and took stock of himself and his surroundings. He was lying on a low air mattress, fully equipped with clean sheets and blankets, in the middle of a large room with a vaulted ceiling. Small LED fixtures on the beams provided warm light. A cheery blaze crackled and hissed in an oversize fireplace while rain drummed heavily on the roof. The air, fresh but not chill, carried scents of wood smoke, seawater, roasted fish, and a sweet-smokey odor he couldn't identify.

His flight suit was gone, replaced by flannel pajamas, and he felt as though he'd just showered. Injuries from the crash had been neatly cleaned and bandaged, and the coffee table next to his makeshift bed held his watch, phone, multitool and other assorted things from his pockets. His gaze sharpened as full consciousness â€" and memory â€" returned in a rush.

Both his jump drive and the data chip from Dash's bag were missing.

He bit back a curse, flung the covers aside and pushed himself up to a sitting position â€" or, rather, tried to. His equilibrium had other ideas, sending him sprawling back onto the mattress, as his temples throbbed with a renewed headache strong enough to make him grunt with pain and slap a hand over his eyes. "Damn...!"

Scraping sounds came from the rafters above his bed, followed by a rush of wings and a pair of querulous chirps. Seconds later, he felt a pair of small, familiar, scaly shapes land on the bed and nudge him. "Hey, you two" he said, reaching out to give them both a reassuring scratch. "Take it easy, I'll be fine..."

Whatever else the crash had done, it hadn't affected his gift for mind-speech. \_Hurt!\_ Nalu sent, reinforcing the word with a skeptical

trill. \_Bad landing\_ added Niho.

Sam snorted at this. "Dragon's got a gift for understatement" he muttered. "Who knew?"

Footfalls sounded from across the room, drew rapidly closer. A familiar voice said "Sam? How do you feel?"

He moved his hand aside and blinked. Kate Ericsson, dressed in soft blue sweats and light slippers, was looking down at him, concern etched across her face. "You were out all last night and well into today" she continued as she knelt down, nudged his two self-appointed watchers aside and touched a portable med-scan to his wrist.

Sam's gaze flicked back and forth between her and the scanner. "Dizzy" he said. "And one mother of a headache. Other than that..."

His stomach growled audibly, reminding him he'd been living on ration bars and adrenaline far too long. "I thought you were a vet" he continued, eyeing the scanner. It was a standard Exergen LifeTest, a type used by paramedics, clinics and hospitals the world over "if you happened to be human."

She smiled as she helped him sit up again. "Double degrees" she said. "In New Berk, you never know whether you'll be working on a dragon or human from day to day. Besides, healing is healing, no matter what species your patient belongs to."

Sam's eyes widened. "Ingrid said almost the same thing."

Kate nodded. "I'm not surprised. Just as Silence can trace her ancestry back to Skye, Ingrid Ericsson was my great-to-the-something-power grandmother. Her journal was just as well preserved as Hiccup's."

Sam pondered this while she stood up and put the scanner on the table. "Don't try to get up just yet" she said, heading for the kitchen area. "I'll get us some munchies."

"Wait!" Sam called, as the two Terrors arranged themselves on either side of him. "There was a jump drive and a micro-OD chip in my things"

"both of which are safely docked in my computer's reader" Kate replied, airily. "You didn't think I was going to sit around twiddling my thumbs until you woke up, did you?"

She was back in a few minutes, balancing a tray loaded with sandwiches, various fruits, pretzels, raw fish for the dragons and two steaming mugs of something which looked and smelled amazingly like the contents of the Night Fury's bowl in his dream. These turned out to be the source of the smokey-sweet odor he'd caught earlier.

"Mead tea" Kate said, picking up a sandwich and devouring a quarter of it in one bite. "Very popular among humans and dragons alike. Good balance of alcohol and caffeine, lots of antioxidants." She looked at him expectantly.

Sam shrugged, retrieved his mug and took a cautious sip. Flavors of honey, citrus, and a dash of peppermint flooded his senses. The liquid left a gentle warmth in its wake as it worked its way down, the warmth spreading throughout his body a few moments later and banishing at least half the headache and nearly all the dizziness. "Wow!" He said, taking a larger gulp.

Kate grinned, knowingly. "Another convert. Don't forget to eat."

He didn't. The only sounds in the room for the next few minutes were those of contented consumption, followed by a surprisingly resonant belch from Nalu. Niho eyed her mate disgustedly for a moment " then produced a belch of her own, strong enough to include a brief flame about the size of a pocket torch. Sam jumped as the edge of the eruption brushed his elbow. Fortunately, all it left in its wake was a 'hot spot' which quickly cooled.

"Hey!" Kate snapped, giving the green Terror a sharp rap on her nose. "Not inside! If you're going to roast each other, take it outdoors."

Somehow, Niho managed to look both rebellious and sheepish. "Yeah, right" Kate said, not buying it for a millisecond. "You really want to help? Find Silence. Go on! Both of you!" She stood up and made shooing motions towards the pair. "More fish and mead tea if you do" she added with a grin, rocking her mug slightly.

The two were off the bed and across the room as if catapulted. Sam watched, bemused, as Nalu attached himself to the door and worked the lever with his jaws. It swung open, letting in a gust of cold air and rain as Niho darted out. Nalu, moving with the assurance of a gecko, scuttled around to the other side of the door and used his tail to pull it closed as he took to the air.

"Did you teach them that?" Sam asked, as the rest of his headache faded away.

Kate shook her head. "Some of the other Terrors did. Considering those two came from a completely different time and culture, they caught on pretty quickly. More tea?"

"Please" he said, holding out his mug. Kate refilled them both and, as if anticipating his next question, said "Silence is the Night Fury you saw when we found you. On that topic, what in Helheim's Gate happened? Lieutenant Dashiell was supposed to read you into the program, as it were, then guide you here himself. Instead, you end up barreling in with the RAF hot on your tail, all ready to set off an international brouhaha just to knock you out of the air!"

Sam's throat clenched. His knuckles went white as his grip on the mug tightened. "Dash" he said, his voice just above a whisper. "Kate... I'm sorry..."

Strong hands covered his, gripped hard. He looked up, barely able to meet her gaze. "Tell me what happened" she said, softly.

Tell her he did. Haltingly, at first, then in a rush like a shattered dam. She was a good listener, helping him over the rough spots and asking incisive questions which pulled out details he hadn't even been aware of at first. He thought he heard the door swing open

again, as he was recounting the details of Dash's death, but he ignored it and went on.

"And the rest, you know" he finished.

Kate nodded, then leaned back in her chair with a deep sigh.

"Dammitall... Dash deserved better than this!"

"Sso he did" came a new voice, deeply resonant but feminine-pitched. Sam glanced towards the door, startled. There, standing near the door, Nalu and Niho to either side, was the silvery-eyed Night Fury he'd seen last night.

With the room's brighter light, he could see her eyes bore a hint of jade green over the gray. A beautifully-worked leather harness, bearing several inlaid semiprecious stones and a series of Nordic runes, done in fine silver thread, crossed over her shoulders and met just below her throat, in a setting which supported a ten-centimeter flawless opal.

The dragon paced slowly over, sat down like an oversized cat next to the bed, and nodded politely. "Fair Windss to you both" she said. "I came in jusst as he wass telling of our Liaisson'ss death. Did I misss anything elsse of importance?"

Kate started to reply, but was interrupted by Sam's exclamation of "I didn't imagine it... you \_can\_ speak!"

The dragon eyed him curiously. "And thiss iss a ssurprise? Afterr what you have experienced?" The corners of her mouth twitched, as she continued in Old Norse: "Would you feel more comfortable with the sspeech of our ancesstorrss?"

Kate laughed as Sam's expression grew even more startled, then made introductions (in English). "Guardian Silence" she began, formally, "this is Healer Sam Shay. Sam, this is our Guardian of Memories, Silence."

Now it was Kate's turn to be surprised. Sam, without any further prompting, bowed his head and extended his hand, palm open and fingers up. Silence, just as smoothly, extended her head and pressed her muzzle firmly against the vet's hand. "I am honored" Sam said. Though he didn't know what 'Guardian of Memories' meant, Silence bore the same air of royalty and command as Skye had.

"The honor iss mine" Silence replied, as she straightened back up. "Asz unlikely asz it may sseem, you were Companion to my ancesstorr, Sskye. I wissh to hear more of your time with her, later. For thiss moment..." She paused, glancing significantly at Kate.

"For this moment" Kate continued, "you've probably got more questions than Silence did as a hatchling. Would you settle for hearing our side of the story first, and then you can ask anything you like?"

Sam nodded, eagerly. "Honestly, right now, I don't think I'd know what to ask first!" He said, with a rueful chuckle.

Kate grinned back. "First and foremost, know that you are more than welcome to remain here, in New Berk, for as long as you like, even

for the rest of your life if you so choose. No one will stop you if you try to leave, but no matter what happens you will \_always\_ have a safe place among us."

As little as six months ago, Sam would have leaped at such an offer. Now, though, he hesitated. "Thank you, and please don't think me rude for asking, but... what's the catch?"

Now it was Kate's turn to hesitate. "He hasz earned the right to know" Silence prompted.

"Fair enough" said Kate, with a sigh. "The catch, Sam, is you'll be dead to the outside world. As far as anyone else you've ever known is concerned, you will have died when your ship crashed. This will likely be the official story from UNEC, complete with a funeral. You would never be able to leave our borders without a disguise."

Sam's jaw dropped. "Are you telling me" he said, slowly, "I could never see my family or friends again? Not Paddy, not my cousins, \_no one?!\_"

"No one you've known who's not aware of Berk and the dragons" she said. "We certainly do have outside helpers, and other enclaves, as you now know, but any outside contact you make would have to be strictly limited to them and those they designate as trustworthy."

She held up a hand at the look on his face. "It's for your protection as well as ours. Do you really think Gupta risked an international brouhaha just for the hell of it? It's painfully obvious he thinks you're the biggest threat since Hitler. You show your face outside our borders, at least for now, and it'll likely be your last living act!"

Sam let his gaze wander from human to dragon and back again. Bitterness flooded over him, betrayal right on its heels. "That's a hell of a choice!" He said, between clenched teeth.

Suddenly, something Kate had said replayed in his head. He latched onto it like a stooping falcon. "Wait... You said 'at least for now.' So there may come a time when I won't have to worry about getting perforated by a laser?"

"There is always hope" Kate said, carefully. "An awful lot depends on what you decide. Let us tell you a little more of our history, and we can go from there, OK?"

Sam considered this, as the silence grew thick enough to slice. Finally, he nodded.

Kate produced a small smile. "Thanks. Now, as you may have already guessed, nearly all of the dragon species have survived to this day, although Scauldrons have dropped considerably in numbers â€" no one's quite sure why. There's been a permanent family group living in Loch Ness, though, for the last few centuries. They tend to keep to themselves, and the locals have done a good job of giving them cover."

"'Hide in plain sight?'" Sam asked, remembering the multitude of 'Nessie' stories he'd read.

Kate nodded. "Exactly. In any case, Hiccup set quite the precedent. Not only was he the first Viking ever to make friends with a dragon, he and his descendants were the first to show others what could be accomplished through friendship with them.

"Sadly, not very many outside the archipelago Old Berk was part of saw things that way. I'll spare you the â€" literally â€" gory details, but suffice to say the spread of Christianity across the world was not particularly kind to anyone, especially dragons."

"The Crussadess were among our darkesst timess" Silence added. "Thosse among your people, who claimed leadersshipp in matters of the Sspirit, ssaw uss asz 'Demonss' to be sslain at every opportunity." A bitter note crept into her tone. "There wass no mercy given; adultss, hatchlingss and egg-bearing mothersss alike were killed, ssimply for being who and what we are. We were forced into ever more remote areass, jusst to ssurvive."

"The good news" Kate continued, "was Hiccup's descendants kept their word. The groundwork for living peacefully with dragons was never completely lost. In fact, our museum has the original journals from Hiccup, his son, Eric, and others. This island was first chosen as a refuge for dragons, and those who chose to share their lives with them, in the early part of the fourteenth century."

"And here we have been, ever ssince" Silence said. "Living our livess as we choosse, bonding with humansss or not, as we choosse..." She trailed off, her gaze turning outward.

Sam was a lot of things. Slow on the uptake was not one of them. "What are you not telling me?"

Silence fixed him with the same unwavering gaze Skye had used when she wanted to drive a point home. "Our kind are dying" she said, after a lengthy pause. "Even with the work of Lance Husa, and hisss mate, Roana, we can only grow our numbersss sso far. Human over-fisshing iss only one of many reassons."

Sam nodded absently, then looked startled. "Wait... you said Lance Husa? Isn't the last name a Norse translation of 'Hyse,' in English?"

The dragon nodded, once. "You have heard of him?"

"\_Heard?!" \_Sam replied, with a laugh. "His work in exobiology was required reading at vet college. The man was, to genetics, what Tesla and Queller have been to physics!" He turned back to Kate. "Was it the same when you were still training?"

"Yes, but it goes a little beyond that. His grandson, Benn, and Amira, Roana's granddaughter, are still with us. In fact, Benn taught me most of what I know about dragon biology. As for Lance, he was once our chieftain, along with then-Guardian of Memories, Substance."

"My grand-dam" added Silence. "Windss blesss her memory... my mother wass the lasst of her hatchlingss before sshe passsed."

The dragon's eyes took on a far-away look as she spoke, prompting Sam



to reach out and touch her neck. "I'm sorry I didn't have a chance to know her" he said, softly.

She leaned against his hand, briefly. "Her lack of eyesight rarely slowed her down. I cannot be certain, but I think she would have approved of you." She shook herself, wings rustling, then continued. "But enough of the past for now."

"Yes" Sam said, pulling his hand back in. "Did you say you can't grow your population outside this island?"

"Or our other enclaves" Silence continued. "To do so would mean revealing our people to yours, on a broad scale" she said. "There is much debate whether such a decision is wise. It is ironic, is it not? Given time, your people will learn of ours regardless of choice."

"How?" Sam asked. "You're in an isolated wilderness area, access strictly limited by Norway's government for anyone going in or out. Seems to me that's pretty good protection"

"Up until the Internet became as big as it is now" Kate said. "Tell me, Sam... How did you first learn of this area? What, in particular, drew you to it?"

"Well, some people I visited in California, where I took some... special training... helped me figure it out." He explained about his early efforts to regain his memory, including the evidence his hosts had shown him.

"Bingo" said Kate. "The world is getting too wired. I would guess, within another century or so, there's not going to be a single spot on this planet which hasn't been photographed, surveyed and mapped, with the possible exception of the deep ocean trenches."

"Dragons are deeply curious, just as you are" Silence said. "No matter how many times we speak of the dangers of contacting humans who are not... accustomed... to us and our ways, there are always those who will push the limits, test the boundaries, even at the risk of their lives. This explains the images your friends showed you."

"Our long-term plans" Kate continued, "have always held the framework for revealing ourselves to the rest of the world. We've all known there will come a day when we can no longer hide, anywhere on the planet. In fact, we came damn close to blowing the lid off, as it were, about thirty years back. When wolves were first driven into extinction"

"What?!" Sam yelled. "Wolves... extinct?! When in bloody blue blazes did that happen?!" His thoughts flashed back to the female he had treated, just before getting dragged back in time. \_Extinct!\_

Now it was Kate's turn to look puzzled. "You didn't know? How could you not, as a UNEC Ranger? Bronson's \_The Last Wolf War\_ is required reading at the Academy. In any case, the dragons fit neatly into the predator's niche left by the wolves' absence. Better, in fact; they won't hunt livestock herds on ranches."

Sam covered his face with his hands, shivering all over despite the

warmth of the room. Finally, he looked up again, and explained about the old mother wolf he'd treated. "I'm guessing" he said, dully, "that 'extinction event' you mention is another effect of my little jaunt back in time, though Saint Blaise only knows what I might have done â€" or not done â€" to cause it."

Kate winced. "I never was much good at chaos theory" she said, softly. "But I do know this much. If you start blaming yourself for every little thing that's different from when you left to when you got back, you're going to drive yourself right off the edge of a cliff."

He snorted and gave her a sour look. "What makes you think I haven't already? Essence Above, Kate... dolphins are still used as performers in marine circuses, while orcas only recently got full protection! Can you even imagine the shock I had when I found out?" He shook his head, sadly. "We should be working with them by now, not throwing them dead fish in exchange for crazy stunts!"

She eyed him curiously. "There's been speculation about cetacean intelligence since the 1800's. Are you saying dolphins are sentient, as in self-aware? And smart enough to do something with it? Sam, what haven't you told us?"

"Very much so!" He gave them a quick history of the Herman Institute's breakthrough. Their expressions went from astonishment to wild enthusiasm as he described his early work with the dolphin team at Yokohama's Tanjii Research Station.

"The best way I can put it" he concluded, "is it was like working with a bunch of well-disciplined pranksters. They had the most ribald sense of humor you could ever imagine, and enough energy to run down a hyperactive five-year old, but they were also fanatics about the quality of their work."

Kate and Silence traded looks. "It iss ssaid" the dragon offered, "that Sscauldronss can sspeak with whaless..."

"Wouldn't surprise me in the least" Sam said. "I'd wager it was much easier for them than it was for Jumbe to figure it out."

Kate's expression was, if possible, even more baffled. "Who?"

"Professor Kanja Jumbe? Originally from Luanda, in west Africa? Brilliant linguist. He pioneered interspecies communication with dolphins. Developed the computer algorithms which led to the Herman Institute's initial translation breakthrough and, expanding on Herman's early work with an artificial sign language, created a synthetic audible language both sides could deal with."

He trailed off as he saw the utter lack of comprehension in Kate's eyes, then sighed and waved a hand. "Never mind" he said. "Obviously, another difference in timelines." He looked back up at Silence. "So what's stopping you from showing the world dragons are real?"

"Human arrogancce!" Silence growled, then looked pointedly at Kate. "You tell him. I do not trusst mysself to sstay calm."

With that she backed away and curled up near the hearth, gazing

steadily into the flames. "She means it" Kate said, her tone sad. "Sam, you already know Secretary Gupta was responsible for screwing with your memory. What you may not know is it was only his latest in a long series of nasty stunts. Give me a moment..."

She got up and walked over to her desk, returning moments later with a data pad. A few taps and a vocal request brought up a series of articles, primarily from public news sources. Others were reports from various science foundations.

"Read through these" Kate said, handing him the device. "They're in digest form, but you can call up the full article by double-tapping whichever one you want."

Sam nodded, accepting the pad. As he went through the entries, a pattern started to emerge. Here, an article about the European Space Agency and their unsuccessful efforts to get funding for FTL drive research.

Another article, a few years more recent, from Scientific American, went on in depth about the Tesla Institute's abandonment of a project which could have quadrupled the range and resolution of existing radio telescopes. The reasoning given was 'Too expensive given current technology.'

There were many other entries, but the last one made Sam's jaw drop. It was a thirty-five year old extract from the proceedings of the University of Hawaii's Board of Regents, regarding a rejected doctoral dissertation from none other than Kanja Jumbe, on the possibility of interspecies communication using synthetic language.

The one thing every article had in common: Subrata Gupta was listed as a voting member of whatever group had been holding the purse-strings, and had voted against each proposal.

"I don't get it" Sam said, handing the pad back to Kate. "The Subrata Gupta I remember was one of the most forward-looking people I ever met. This oneâ€" He gestured at the pad, "â€"if the articles are right, he's a raging xenophobe!"

"It's worse than that" Kate said, setting the device aside. "He's surrounded himself with a bunch of cronies among the UN Special Forces and the Guard. The Norwegian government, though in theory the head of a sovereign nation, has been told, in no uncertain terms, any attempt to reveal the presence of dragons to the rest of the world will be met with 'a strong military response.'"

Sam went white with shock as his worst fears were confirmed. "...No..."

"Yess" put in Silence, still gazing at the flames. "If we attempt to sspread beyond our enclavess, we cannot help but reveal ourssselfess. If we reveal ourssselfess, no matter how we are sseen by othersss, we may all be ssent home on the Sspirit Windss. By forssse."

Utter quiet ruled the room for several minutes. Finally, Sam spoke up. "But you must have allies outside the island" he said. "There must be some way you can let the public know you're here. Once they're on your side â€" and it's almost certain they would be, once

they know the whole story " there's no way Gupta could"

"The hell he couldn't!" Kate interrupted. "Any verified information about our community which leaks to the public, and we'd all be wiped out before the public was fully aware of what happened. The whole thing could be swept under the rug as a misunderstood 'military exercise.'

"But you've got hard evidence!" Sam almost shouted. "You've got everything you need to plead your case before the World Court in Geneva"

"We don't!" Kate snapped back, just as emphatically. Then, more calmly, "Sam, it's hard to explain just how far Gupta's poison has seeped into the UN. Even with what you've brought us " the records of what happened to you and your ship, the alteration of official logs " it can still be explained away under 'National Security.' No one who matters would bat an eye about it.

"As for Nalu and Niho, they're biologically indistinguishable from the rest of the Terror population. There's no conclusive difference we can point to and say 'See, they came from a different time.' Believe me, I've looked!

"What we need is evidence so solid, so impossible to ignore, that it gives the General Assembly the leverage to unseat Gupta. That's why I've been looking through your data so closely."

Sam dropped back on the bed, an arm thrown over his eyes, and pondered what he'd learned. This is insane! Dolphins as circus performers, wolves wiped out, another sentient race held prisoner on an island in the middle of nowhere, a xenophobic madman at the top of UN Command... Saint Blaise Above, why didn't I stay in Old Berk?!

He flinched as a callused hand gripped his arm and pulled it gently away. Kate gazed down at him as Nalu and Niho pressed themselves hard against his sides, purring hard enough to make the entire mattress vibrate. A moment later, Silence added herself to the group, her gaze like a cool cloth on a fevered brow.

"No one" she rumbled, softly, "human or dragon, blameless you for what has happened. The Spirit Wind blows where they will. All we can do is steer within them."

"That's Silence's flowery way of saying there is always hope" Kate added, with a grin, drawing a huff of mock annoyance from the Night Fury. "I've only worked through about half your data. Also, Gupta's not immortal, and he's no spring chicken. As long as we keep a low profile, Time itself may well manage to do what we can't."

She smiled. It lit up the room. "The important thing, Sam Shay, is what you decide to do next. You're free to leave, if you want, but as I've told you there's no guarantee Gupta will just leave you alone."

"Or, you are free to stay with us" Silence added. "Our warm season is as pleasant as our winters are cold."

"And we can always use a good, multi-talented vet" Kate added, then

raised a hand as Sam took a breath. "No... don't answer yet. Stay with us for a few days, get to know our village and our people, human and scaled alike. Then decide."

For the first time in what seemed like forever, Sam felt a smile creasing his face. "Well, if nothing else, I want to see what data you've recovered. I barely had time to glance at it."

He sat up, carefully. Nalu and Niho chirped at him, then moved aside, though they didn't leave the bed. "It's all right, you two" he said, chuckling, as he scratched them both under the chin. "Thanks for the support."

A sense of calm determination swept through him as he gazed at Silence and Kate. In that moment, he made a silent pledge: Whatever else happens, I will find a way to make Gupta answer for what he's done!

"Yes" he said, firmly, as he stood up. His equilibrium was better, but he still swayed a bit. A massive black head was instantly at his side, providing support until the dizziness passed. "Thanks, Silence" he said, as she and Kate guided him towards the desk.

He couldn't suppress an appreciative whistle as he sat down in front of the neat array of computer hardware. Four virtual screens hung in midair, just above the desk's surface, a product of the system's four-way holographic display. One displayed a newscast, though the sound was muted. Another, apparently in idle mode, was displaying a new image every ten seconds or so. The pictures were a fascinating mix of landscapes, humans, dragons and birds.

"Just some 'Life in Berk' shots" Kate explained, as she sat down next to him on a short stool. "Your data's on the lower pair. So far, I've only been able to go through what was on your jump drive. The OD card needs a retina scan to unlock it. It didn't like mine, so I'm guessing Dash coded it to himself."

"Maybe, maybe not" Sam said. He double-tapped the optical drive icon, then pressed the retinal reader against his left eye. One bright green flash later, the target screen displayed BIOMETRIC ACCEPTED, SECONDARY PASSWORD REQUIRED. WARNING: THREE FAILED ATTEMPTS AT PASSWORD ENTRY WILL RESULT IN DATA DESTRUCTION. ENTER SECONDARY PASSWORD NOW:

"Crap" Kate muttered, as Silence huffed irritably. She'd been following the proceedings over Sam's shoulder. "Our liaison could be too cautious" she hissed.

Sam nodded absently as he tried a likely password, then a second. "Frell!" He said, as the screen flashed a bright red warning about this being the last attempt.

He stared fixedly at the screen, thinking hard. Something we'd both know, something memorable to us alone, but unique enough to be hard for anyone else to guess...

Inspiration struck. "Couldn't be that simple" he muttered, as he reached for the keyboard once more.

Kate's grip on his wrist stopped him. "Sam, if you've got the

slightest doubt about this, leave it. We can get the card to your friends in California. They might be able to break the lock without losing any data."

He shook his head. "I know this type of card, Kate. Any kind of tampering, outside of the right password, and it'll wipe itself cleaner than new snow. There's no way to try and read it with a laser interferometer either, because the casing itself has light shielding embedded."

"Any encrypted device can be cracked" she said, firmly. "But not if it's erased!"

"True" Sam said. "But it's a matter of time, effort, and tools. Tesla's Basement certainly has no shortage of effort or tools, but time is another thing. Maybe I'm getting more paranoid than I should, but if Gupta wants me dead badly enough to risk an international incident, we have no way to know if he'll stop at one attempt, no matter where I am!"

"Thiss iss a good point" Silence said, surprising them both. "Try again, Ssam. We have very little to losse, even if you fail."

Kate sighed and raised both hands in surrender. "Who am I to argue with a Night Fury?"

Sam nodded, then reached for the keys. After a moment's hesitation, he tapped out his final attempt and hit ENTER before anyone could change their mind. The screen blanked for five long secondsâ€

â€then flashed back to life with a video recording of Dashiell in his office. He looked tired, more so than Sam could remember, but the look was tempered with a fiery commitment he'd seen only twice before. Kate's jaw dropped. "How...?"

"Dash's last words to me" Sam said, with a sad little smile, "were 'zero-zero-two-zero,' a pre-arranged transponder code, and 'Article 14,' which refers to the asylum provisions in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That's how he coded the password. Let's see what he has to say..."

He clicked the 'PLAY' tab.

"\_Sam, if you're seeing this recording, chances are pretty good I'm fish bait by now. I'm sorry it worked out that way â€ I really wanted to see your reaction when you met the folks at New Berk, and I don't mean just humans!\_"

"\_You know I'm no good with flowery speeches, so I'll keep it short. Your debriefing recording follows this one, along with some extra pieces I kept. I hope they help. I know what I'd like to see you do next, but it'll be what you choose that's important. I trust you to do the Right Thing... Always have, always will.\_"

"\_Give everyone on the island my best. Dashiell out.\_"

The recording blinked off, then the screen lit once again. Sam shivered with Deja Vu, as he watched and listened. After a few minutes, he began fast-forwarding. "Hey!" Kate protested. "There

might have been something important earlier on. Go back!"

"Not yet" Sam said. "Nothing during the debriefing itself will be of much help. Dash said he'd kept some extras. I think he might have left the recorder running after I was dismissed. If he did, and Gupta didn't realize it..."

He tapped two keys in quick succession. The recording froze after the point where Sam had left the office, then started forward again. Both Kate and Silence drew sharp breaths as Gupta, after arguing with Dash, picked up the phone, dialed and said "Martin, forty milligrams Axonase-B along with whatever else Ranger Shay is being given..."

"That's it" Kate said, softly. "Fifteen-plus years we've been waiting to catch him in a capital-class screw up, and he does it on camera!"

She jumped out of her chair with a delighted whoop. "Axonase has only one purpose, he named you and the drug in the same sentence, and he had no Council or Crown Court order to use the stuff! Oh, Sam, we've got him by the balls!"

Before he could so much as take a breath to reply, Sam found himself pulled into an enthusiastic bear hug " followed by an equally enthusiastic kiss.

"Saint Blaise Above!" He gasped, as she finally let him go. "Don't you ever come up for air?!"

The expression in his eyes caused Kate to pause in her antics. "Sam, what's wrong? We've got evidence no court could ignore!"

"And the court's first question is going to be 'Where did you get the recording?' Kate, I'm sorry to break this to you, but UNEC debriefing recordings are not public record in any sense of the word. This means whatever we've got here wouldn't be admissible as evidence by itself."

Rarely had Sam seen anyone go from the height of elation to the depths of despair so quickly. "So, we're back to square one? Is that what you're saying? Dammitall, Sam, we are being slowly suffocated! I don't care if that recording is public, private, or ends up on the Jerry Springer Memorial Network. We need to get it Out There!"

"You're absolutely right" Sam said, calmly, just as Kate took a breath to continue her tirade. The breath went back out with a whoosh as she eyed him quizzically. "But you said it wouldn't be admissible by itself."

"Yes, Doctor," he agreed, grinning slightly. "That is exactly what I said." He crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

Kate's eyes suddenly widened. "But what else do we have? Are you holding out on me?"

"Not a bit" Sam said. "But as for 'what else' you have, they're staring at you right now." He nodded at Silence and the two Terrors. "Better yet, coming up in March of next year, there's a very special

meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission. It'll be their 86th anniversary, and there's likely to be a pretty big media party..."

Kate's jaw dropped as she realized what he was thinking. "You can't be serious! Sam, who's side are you on?!"

Sam raised both hands. "I never said it would be easy, or risk-free. But look at how you're living now, Kate. You, Silence, the rest of the village and all the other dragons. Gupta and his cronies have made you all prisoners! Do you really think it's going to get any better if you just sit around and wait? How do you know Gupta isn't already grooming someone who's just as bad as he is, if not worse, to replace him when his term expires?"

"You sseem very certain yourr worrld will accept uss" said Silence. "How can you be sso ssure? How can you know there are not more like the Dark One in powerr?"

"I could never be one hundred percent certain" Sam replied. "No one could. But, I've got one thing going for me which no one else does; memories of how things can be, before my little jaunt through Time tossed a spanner into the gears."

"Sstop" Silence said, as she stood up and headed for the door. "I have hearrd enough to call for a village-wide Council. All musst hear whatever plan you have come up with. Resst now. We will talk more tomorrow."

With that, she was gone, pulling the door closed with her tail just as the Terrors had. Sam felt a sudden rush of weariness. He was startled to see nearly four hours had passed. "Do you really have a plan?" Kate asked, as he got ready to go back to bed. "Or just half-baked ideas?"

"Yes" Sam replied, as he flipped the covers back and sat down on the mattress.

Kate shook her head. "You're nuts, Shay. You know that? Pure nucking futz!"

"But in a good way" he shot back, as he settled into place. Nalu and Niho promptly took up positions on either side, purring softly. "Kate, I've been lied to, betrayed by my own people, drugged, shot at and generally treated like a pariah simply because I know about another sentient species on the planet. That's just wrong on so many levels, I don't know where to start!"

"I wasn't kidding when I said my memories of what can be could help. Essence Above, I've already worked with dolphins! Even the Church came to grips with the fact they were sentient, no matter what kind of mess it made out of their Holy Scriptures. I don't see why dragons would be any different."

"I hope you're right" she replied, softly. "I really do. I also hope you're not afraid of public speaking, because whatever scheme you cook up, you get to explain it to the Council!"

With that, she got up and went back to her desk. The lights in the living room went off a moment later. Sam turned over and willed



himself to relax, at least in body. His mind was going like a runaway bullet train, sifting one idea after another. He snorted, softly, as the memory of one of his favorite SciFi first-contact novels (Foster's 'Nor Crystal Tears') crossed his mind: \_Now I know how Ryozenzuzex felt!\_

An hour of tossing and turning later, he muttered a curse and rummaged for his personal book reader. The screen flickered to life with a list of titles; a generous assortment of veterinary reference texts, balanced with another section composed entirely of science fiction and fantasy. He frowned as he saw the two indexes had, somehow, gotten merged. \_Must have gotten knocked around in the crash\_ he thought.

He started to make the necessary adjustments to separate the sections â€" then froze, as one particular author and title, tucked neatly between \_Howl's Moving Castle\_, \_by Diana Wynne Jones\_, and \_Uhura's Song\_ by Janet Kagan, caught his eye.

\_Jumbe, Kanja, Ph.d: 'Elements of Cetacean Communication\_' \_2\_\_nd\_\_ Ed., Copyright 2053, University of Hawaii Press.\_

Hands trembling slightly, hardly daring to believe, Sam double-tapped the entry and started paging through it. It was all there: Full mathematical descriptions of Dr. Jumbe's algorithms, details on the hardware used during initial attempts at communication, and a full description of the synthetic language which had been developed as a result!

He scrambled out of bed, ignoring the dragons' protests as they were suddenly buried in top covers, and stumbled toward Kate's desk. She had, apparently, gone to bed a while ago, but that didn't stop him from linking his reader to her computer and making two backup copies of Jumbe's book, one to a spare optical storage card and the other to her desktop.

As he did so, an idea took root and began to grow. The eventual result was a bizarre mix of common sense and uncommon insanity. It would take time, careful planning and every single Outside helper the island community could muster, including some they likely didn't know about. Yet.

If it went bad, most if not all the remaining dragons could be wiped out within a single day, assuming Gupta's xenophobic reach extended as far as Kate thought it did. But if Gupta was bluffing and Sam's idea worked...

\_If it works\_ he mused, as he put the reader carefully away and went back to bed, \_the human race is in for a major New Year's surprise and Gupta's little empire will crumble down on top of him!\_

Sleep claimed him moments later.

The day dawned bright and clear, the sun's rays turning leftover rain puddles into diamond-bright sparks. The air was refreshing, though chill, and Sam was grateful for the hooded parka he'd been given. He walked briskly along, Nalu perched comfortably on his shoulder, exchanging greetings with other villagers as he passed.

This was his fifth day in New Berk, and he still found himself amazed

at the balance of ancient and contemporary the community had achieved. Fishing, for example, was done the same way the village's Viking ancestors had, with hand-woven nets and longboats. The nets were made from locally-grown hemp, as were most ropes.

The community had an abundant supply of livestock, including goats, sheep and cattle. These provided milk, cheese and butter (all hand-made), meat, wool and leather. Well-tended crops provided potatoes, onions, and various other vegetables.

Conspicuous by their absence were horses and donkeys, but Sam quickly found out why. Who had need of a ground-bound mount when a dragon could offer much faster (and smoother) air transport? The villagers who lacked a draconic companion large enough to carry them had no shortage of friends who could accommodate them.

As agrarian as the community clearly was, modern conveniences were not absent. Solar-powered tractors took care of farming needs. Electricity was provided by a combination of geothermal taps and ocean wave-driven generators. Each home had running water, some form of centralized heat and indoor plumbing. The compact wastewater-treatment plant was every bit as contemporary as Sam had ever seen, while network connections were provided by a redundant mix of well-concealed microwave radios and long-distance fiber optics.

This was a community which could, in theory, sustain itself nearly indefinitely.

It was also a community in severe danger of stagnation.

Humans are, by nature, social creatures, as are most dragon species. Many of the island's residents had never been beyond its borders, yet they were becoming increasingly curious about the outside world, made so by the vast amount of information available on the Internet-connected terminals in the island's community center.

Details of Sam's arrival, and the fact he was to present his proposal to the ruling Council today, had spread like wildfire in a dry forest. Though he walked amidst a steady stream of villagers, all headed for the Council Hall, he also seemed to walk in the midst of an invisible three-meter barrier. Every dragon passing overhead slowed to study him with curious "and, in many cases, oddly hopeful" eyes. He gulped, trying to ignore the fresh crop of butterflies taking wing somewhere near his spleen.

Nalu suddenly stood up on his shoulder, chirping excitedly. At the same instant, a familiar voice yelled "Hey! Sam!"

He glanced around, startled. "Up here!" Called the voice, from almost directly overhead. Shading his eyes, Sam looked up to see a brilliantly-scaled Nadder, cobalt-blue with yellow highlights, doing a slow circle barely five meters above him. He nearly stumbled as he recognized the dragon's rider: \_"Gerry?!"\_

The dragon stopped circling and glided down to land beside him, nodding a greeting. Gerry Hoshino hopped down to grab his former partner in a bear hug. "None other!" He said, with a grin which threatened to split his face apart. "I would have come to see you

sooner, but I got in late last night and I didn't want to wake you."

Sam was rendered speechless. His friend was dressed just like a typical Berk islander, in the greens and browns of dyed linen and leather, though he retained his Ranger-issue boots.

"Come on" he said, taking Sam's elbow as they started up the gentle slope towards the meeting hall, the Nadder keeping easy pace beside them. "We'll walk you up. This, by the way" he continued, gesturing to the blue dragon, "is my draconic partner, Saffyre. Saff, this is Sam Shay, who I'm sure you're tired of hearing me blather about."

The Nadder nodded once again, and extended her muzzle for Sam to touch. Her large eyes were the same brilliant yellow as the highlighting on her wing edges. "Fair Windss and good hunting, Ssam Sshay" she said. "I am mosst curiouss to hear what you have to tell uss."

"In that case" Sam said, "I hope I can keep everything straight in my head." He eyed the Nadder thoughtfully. "Saffyre, do you play darts?"

The dragon tilted her head to one side, her expression turning quizzical. "What are 'dartss?'"

Sam and Gerry took turns explaining. As they did Sam found much of the tension in his guts was draining away, thanks to the presence of a familiar face. Saffyre swished her well-armed tail for a moment, a thoughtful expression on her round face. "It ssoundss like a good challenge" she said, finally. "Gerry, will you and Ssam sshow me?"

They both laughed. "After the meeting, Saff" Gerry said, giving her an affectionate slap on the neck, then eyeing Sam with mock annoyance. "Look what you started!"

"Blame it on a dream" he shot back, then changed the subject. "So, I'm guessing you're another Outside Liaison, like Dash was?"

Gerry nodded. "Helpful to have at least one in the UNEC Command chain as well as the field" he said. His face turned more serious than Sam could ever remember seeing it. "We all heard about Dash, Sam. I'm really sorry... I know you two were close."

Sam dropped an arm around the smaller man's shoulders. "Thanks. It's going to take me a while to get over it. I'm guessing Gupta's framing me as the killer?"

"Not directly" Gerry replied. "Though one of those asinine charges against you was 'Negligence leading to the death of a fellow officer.' That's what the 'official' report says, along with attributing your desertion to insanity."

He eyed his friend with a mixture of admiration and shock. "You sure stirred up a hornet's nest! UNEC's demanding the remains of your ship, and the Norwegian government's agreed."

Sam snorted. "Let 'em have it. Silence and I are getting along just

fine."

Gerry eyed his friend, surprised. "This from someone who wouldn't even get up on a horse as a kid? Who's always insisted that anything built for riding needs an engine and air conditioning?"

Sam just smiled. Gerry shook his head in amazement. "Saint Blaise Above, Sam, that's great! I knew you had it in you. And you're not afraid of heights any more?"

"Thank Skye for that" he replied. "I certainly do, every time Silence and I go up!"

They entered the hall. Kate intercepted them almost as they came through the door, and guided them to a front tier of seats reserved for those who would be speaking. "Gerry, you're giving your report first, then we'll have Sam give his proposal. Assuming" she continued, her tone taking on unmistakable warning, "he has it ready?"

"Oh, ye of little faith" Sam muttered, as he unzipped his parka and produced a thick folder from an inner pocket. Kate nodded, and ushered them both to seats near the podium.

The room itself was enormous, easily half the size of an indoor football stadium, with multiple tiers of seats and perches suspended from duralloy cables for the dragons who chose not to sit with their human counterparts. Sam's newly-trained technician's eye picked out the details of a first-class sound system, as well as a holoprojector. Lighting was provided by numerous LED fixtures and a full set of stage lights. Microphones were scattered throughout the tiers, accommodating anyone in the audience who might have questions of any given presenter.

The stage itself was ranked in two tiers. Arrayed within these tiers were six humans, and six dragons of varying species; Two Nadders, a Zippleback, two Monstrous Nightmares and one Gronckle. They were alternating between talking amongst themselves and watching the audience.

One of the humans in particular caught Sam's eye. Tall â€" nearly two full meters, with a slender build and chestnut-brown hair topping clean-shaven features. He wore an elaborate sash, decorated much the same as Silence's, and carried an air of quiet authority at odds with his youthful appearance.

"Benn Hyse, village chieftain" came Kate's voice, softly, from his left. "Lance Hyse's grandson and our lead vet. His dragon companion is the Nightmare on the left â€" Mystiske."

Sam blinked. "Translates as 'mysterious'" he said. "Is there a reason behind the name?"

A familiar black form settled down to his right. "Becausse" Silence said, just as softly, "we rarely ssee him outsside of gatheringss ssuch asz thiss. It iss ssaid hiss grandssire, Arvekni, wass much the ssame."

"Hardly anyone dares argue with him, though" Kate added. "He's one of the wisest heads on the Council. Don't be surprised if he asks you

some pointed questions. The best advice I can give is answer directly and honestly, no matter how you think the answer may sound!"

Three resonant chime notes sounded throughout the hall. The noise level dropped abruptly as everyone took their seat, perch, or portion of floor. Benn Hyse took his place at the stage podium, then touched a switch on his headset and spoke.

"People of Berk" he said, his voice a pleasant tenor. "As you are likely aware, there are several issues important to our entire island to be discussed and, later, voted on.

"To start, the Council recognizes Outside Liaison Gerald Hoshino, Alladale Base, UNEC."

A spotlight highlighted the podium to Sam's right, placed on a raised platform facing the council assembly at stage center. Gerry climbed up to it and positioned the mic. "Thank you, Chief Hyse" he said. "My report will be brief"

He went on, describing much of what he and Sam had already talked about on the way to the meeting. "In summary" he finished, "UNEC Command has agreed to Ranger Shay's asylum, provided he remain in Berk for the rest of his life, and the remains of his aircar are returned to Alladale base. He will be listed in their public record as 'missing, presumed dead,' due to an aircar crash."

Sam squeezed his eyes shut. Though he had half-expected something like this, after what Gerry had told him, it still came as a shock. \_There's a big difference between thinking you might be a virtual prisoner and \_knowing\_ it\_ he thought, bitterly.

"In addition" Gerry continued, "the death of our former Liaison, Lieutenant Robert Dashiell, will be listed as accidental, in the line of duty, due to injuries suffered while caught in crossfire. The choice of his successor has not yet been formalized, but the indications are Sergeant Thomas Madden will soon be promoted to Lieutenant and take over in Dashiell's place."

Sam winced, and felt a few moments of relief he would no longer be a part of UNEC. Madden was a good enough Ranger, but also very much a micro-manager. Worse, he was as 'By the Book' as a raw recruit. \_Just the kind of stooge Gupta probably adores\_ he grumbled to himself.

He was not alone in his feelings. Muttering, and quite a few curses, rippled through the crowd as Gerry closed his folder. It seemed Dashiell had been well-liked.

"With that said" Gerry concluded, with a wry grin, "I believe Ranger Shay has a proposal to put before you, which is not bad for a supposed corpse." A low ripple of laughter went through the room. "Chief Hyse, I yield the floor."

"Thank you, Liaison Hoshino" came the amplified reply. "The Council recognizes our newest arrival, Ranger Sam Shay, under protective asylum, formerly of UNEC."

Sam took a deep breath and stood up, clutching his folder tight enough to turn his knuckles white. As he passed Gerry, on his way to the podium, he hissed "Smart-ass!"

"And proud of it!" Hoshino shot back. "Go get 'em, tiger!"

Sam did exactly that. He thanked the chief, opened his folder, and began laying out his plan.

The hall went progressively more silent as he continued, to the point where it seemed his voice was the only sound in the room. He felt the weight of hundreds of eyes on him; many supportive, thankfully, though others felt neutral or outright hostile. Though it took just fifteen minutes to run through the entire presentation, it felt more like fifteen hours to Sam.

"In summary" he concluded, "I don't see how you can do anything else. The world is getting smaller, metaphorically speaking, every day. There is no doubt New Berk and its secrets will, eventually, come to light. It's merely a question of when, and who is in control when it happens."

His gaze swept the room. "If you do this now, it is yourselves and your draconic friends who will be in control. If someone else puts two and two together, all you'll be able to do is react to someone else's actions. Granted, Time is on your side at the moment, but there's no guarantee it'll stay that way."

He closed the folder. "Chief Hyse, I thank you and the people of New Berk, and I yield the floor."

The room exploded into verbal chaos. Even the Council members, human and dragon alike, seemed shaken. Finally, unable to restore order with the room-filling chimes, Chief Hyse murmured something to Mystiske. The Nightmare nodded, then reared up and let loose with a roar which shook the rafters.

"Thank you, Ranger Shay" the chief said, into the sudden silence. "Would everyone please sit, perch or crouch, whatever the case, and quiet down? We'll all have a chance to discuss this proposal, and there will certainly be both popular and Council votes before \_any\_ course of action is chosen!"

Sam watched in amazement as the entire audience did indeed settle down. Not without much muttering, hissing and rumbling, but settle they did. \_The UN General Assembly could learn something from these people\_ he mused.

"Thank you" the chief said. "In light of this new information, I call for a one-day recess. We will reconvene tomorrow, same time. The Council will then present its recommendations, followed by a community-wide vote. Any objection or further comment?"

More muttering, but no one spoke up. "Very well. This meeting stands adjourned. Ranger Shay, please remain for now."

A single chime reverberated throughout the room, heralding the most orderly mass exit Sam had ever seen. It helped, of course, that the hall's doors were nearly as wide and high as barn doors, to allow for draconic passage. This meant nearly a dozen people could exit, side by side, at one time.

Sam waited until the front row started to clear, then climbed down

from the podium and settled shakily into the nearest seat. He felt drained, the wild energy which had fueled his presentation now a distant memory. Silence paced over and laid her head in his lap. "Well ssspoken" she said.

Right now, that tiny bit of support meant more to him than a Nobel Prize. He smiled, and reached down to scratch behind an ear flap. "Thanks" he said, then tensed as the chief and Mystiske approached. "I hope they agree with you."

"Ranger Shay" the chief said, nodding. "Would you and Silence walk with us, please?"

"Certainly, sir" Sam replied, as Silence moved aside to let him stand. All four of them headed slowly for the nearest door. "I'll make you a deal" the chief said, smiling slightly. "Don't call me 'sir,' and I won't have to keep calling you 'Ranger Shay.'" He extended a hand.

Sam took it, shook firmly. "Deal. Please, call me Sam."

"And you can call me Benn. Two N's, never found out why. Perhaps a private joke on the part of my parents. My dragon companion is Mystiske." He nodded at the Nightmare as they moved outside and halted on a wide knoll, overlooking the village's natural harbor. The sun was just past its noon position and, though the air had warmed, it was still what Sam considered nippy.

Sam extended his hand as the huge dragon extended his muzzle for a greeting touch. His skin, though just as smoothly scaled as Silence's, felt much warmer. "'Mysst,' to my friendss" he rumbled, a sound like a pile of rocks sliding together. Sam wondered if the extended 's' sounds were characteristic of any dragon who learned human speech. "May I count you among them, Ssam?"

"I would be honored if you did" Sam replied, a little awed by the 'gentle giant' effect the Nightmare projected.

"Sso I sshall, then" Myst replied, settling into a comfortable crouch. Silence parked herself just behind Sam, clearly inviting him to use her as a backrest. He did so, grateful for the Night Fury's warmth even with his parka zipped up. "I'm guessing you have some questions for me?"

"Myst more than myself" the chief said, relaxing against the Nightmare's side. "He's good at ferreting out things I might miss."

"You are too modesst" the dragon rumbled, with a hint of what sounded like a chuckle, before turning his full attention to Sam. He met the lantern-yellow gaze steadily, though his innards quivered. "Of all you have told uss thiss day" Myst said, slowly, "there iss one quesstion I musst have an ansswer to: Are you, Ssam Sshay, driven by vengeansse or compasssion?"

Startled, Sam sat bolt upright. His mind whirled frantically, caught completely off-guard. Myst continued "Conssider. Look deep within yourssself, for that iss where Truth iss found."

It took a few minutes, but Sam was finally able to calm his thoughts

and dig deep. He was startled to find much of his motivation was indeed fueled by his anger at Subrata Gupta, and a desire to see him fall in disgrace.

And yet, there was something deeper. He reached for it, felt as though he was reaching through an inky black pool where he couldn't see anything below the first inch or so of surface...

There it was. Past the anger, past the hurt, past the betrayal, it came to him as clear and welcoming as a light in the window of shelter on a stormy night. He looked up, blinked, caught Silence's gaze, saw her own recognition of what he'd just realized. She dipped her head at the same time he wrapped his arms around her neck, holding on, basking in both physical and emotional warmth. A moment later, she covered him with a wing and purred just enough for him to feel.

Finally, they pulled away and Sam started to speak. No one else had so much as twitched.

"Humans" he said, slowly, but with growing confidence, "have, for thousands of years, held ourselves above other species. We've isolated ourselves on a high cliff and let no others approach, for fear of losing what we thought was superiority. The problem is 'superiority' itself is an illusion, a man-made concept. Why do the labels of 'superior' and 'inferior' even have to apply? Isn't it enough to simply \_be?\_"

"Such isolation isn't natural. It has, over time, caused a longing, a loneliness in each and every one of us. If you don't agree, ask yourself: Why do most people keep pets of one kind or another? Why have we spent billions of dollars and decades of time hunting for extraterrestrial radio signals? Why is there still an expedition to Mars in the planning stage? Why are there people who keep wondering 'Is this all there is? Is this all I am? Is there nothing more?'"

"In my time, one man grew up enough to believe there was more. His work ended that racial loneliness for any who were open to leaving it behind, even though the species we found couldn't speak as we did, never built things as we did and lived \_completely differently\_ from us. All of a sudden, none of those things mattered. The best way I can put it is we had, for the first time, a non-human race which could hold up a mirror up to us and say, 'Take a good look: Is this really what you want?'"

His gaze wandered out across the harbor. "In the time I've come back to, that never happened. With very few exceptions, the human race has managed to hang on to its isolation. Whatever I did, or didn't do, in the past, obviously had some pretty drastic effects on the way things are now."

He looked back, locking gazes with Myst. "Ending this isolation, just as Professor Jumbe did, would be 'vengeance' enough. I don't ever want to deny anyone else the opportunity to share what you and Benn, what I and Silence, what \_anyone\_ who has come to know another intelligent being, can share. How's that for an answer?"

Myst's yellow eyes seemed to glow brighter. Benn was grinning as wide as Gerry had earlier. "Ssam Sshay" the Nightmare rumbled, warmly. "You are truly of Berk. Welcome home!"



## 15. Chapter 15

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 15\*\***

"\_The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking." (Albert Einstein)\_

Sam Shay was many things. A politician was not one of them. He'd had more than enough exposure to UNEC bureaucracy over the years to know major decisions were usually not made swiftly, nor necessarily in a manner which made the most sense to address a given problem.

So, his beliefs were rattled once again when the Berk Council reconvened, discussed his proposal in depth and put it out to the village and the other enclaves (via encrypted satellite link) for a popular vote the same day. The results: Eighty-one percent in favor, ten percent opposed, nine percent abstaining.

Most definitely 'his' proposal. Although Chief Hyse was clearly in charge, and several others were assigned the details, it was equally clear responsibility for the plan's results would fall squarely on Sam's shoulders.

Such a load would have sent him screaming for cover barely four months ago. Now, cut loose as he was from UNEC and his former life, he found himself looking at it with Zen-like detachment. As a long-dead, but very wise, musician named Jimmy Buffett had put it; 'You've only got two choices, having fun or freaking out.'

He much preferred 'having fun' â€" even if Silence's idea of it put his newfound courage in the face of heights to some serious stress-tests.

Days passed, became weeks. Sam's wrecked aircar was quietly hauled off by a UNEC double-R team, its members blissfully unaware of the exotic creatures only a few kilometers away. Kate, despite his protests, insisted he remain lodged in a spare room at her home. "Quit complaining" she told him. "I'm almost a quarter through with Dr. Jumbe's book, and I want you around if I have questions."

Deep down, Sam suspected it was more than that. He was finding it increasingly difficult to keep their relationship on a 'professional' level. Kate was intelligent, attractive, and (except for her own draconic companion, another Night Fury, currently off-island), still single. He'd gotten up the nerve to ask her about this, one night over dinner. She'd arched her eyebrows and eyed him with a downright predatory grin: "Why, Doctor Shay, are you proposing something?"

He stuttered, trying desperately to ignore how hot his ears suddenly felt. Kate laughed, and squeezed his hand. "Relax, Sam! I just haven't found the right guy yet. You might be the one, or not. I'll let you know either way when I'm good and ready."

The days grew shorter, and colder, though the temperature never dropped much below zero degrees C. "Climate change is still very much

with us" Benn Hyse told him, one day over lunch. "Ocean levels are expected to rise another thirty centimeters over the next century, thanks to the polar melts. Don't be surprised if our snow season doesn't last more than a couple of weeks."

It didn't, which turned out to be a good thing for the first phase of what was now dubbed 'Sliding Scales.'

It began on a cloudy moonless night in January, the week after the New Year. A large assortment of aircars and hydrofoils, most of which had brought specially-cleared guests and their families to the island for the holiday celebrations, all departed in different directions. To outward appearances, they were carrying those same guests back home.

Each also carried at least two dragons. The larger craft were able to take as many as four. As each craft neared its destination, the dragons slipped out into either air or sea, and made their own way to arranged meeting spots, set up in advance by Berk's Outside Liaisons.

In some cases, this was nothing more than a comfortable (for dragons, anyway) sea cave. In others, the attic or basement of a large building. Still others made their way to tiny airfields, to be whisked away in secret by innocent-looking cargo aircraft.

The exodus of dragons and their human companions continued over the next few weeks, always under the cover of night, until the island seemed nearly empty. All were volunteers, thoroughly briefed by the Berk Council and Sam. Their instructions were simple: "Settle in, stay out of sight. Wait for word from your companions."

That word came near the end of February, once the 'seeding' was complete. In small isolated towns and villages all over the world, most of which were as near to being 'off the grid' as possible for a wired world, word-of-mouth started spreading about strange (but clearly friendly) lizard-like creatures and their human companions.

The introductions took many forms: In the coastal town of Norden, Germany, an outside Berker spent a sunny afternoon in a public park, tossing Frisbees for a pair of Terrible Terrors. The audience he attracted, though unusually large for a late-winter day, was very well-mannered and utterly enthralled by the antics of the two dragons.

Their human companion was equally well-mannered, more than happy to talk about his scaly friends "and about the situation on a certain island several hundred kilometers to the north. By the time he finished, and word had spread through the crowd, he was given ample warning when the local police stopped by to see what was going on.

All the officers saw, when they finally managed to tunnel to the front of the crowd, was a crazy foreigner doing silly stunts with a pair of garish plastic discs. They retreated to their vehicle with much muttering about how people would stop to look at darn near anything these days...

Hamo Beach was one of Maui's most secluded. It was also one of the

most popular, with locals and visitors alike, for sunset-gazing. What no one expected, on one particularly nice evening in early March, was a huge scarlet dragon, tucked comfortably into the sand and gazing out over the water with every sign of utter contentment.

Alarm quickly gave way to curiosity, a transition aided in large part by the presence of two swimsuit-clad humans, a man and a woman, who gave off a strong impression of 'married couple.' They were both golden-haired, stocky without appearing fat, and bore the lighter brown of a 'tourist tan' as opposed to the caramel-tinted locals. Had it not been for the fact they were both leaning comfortably against the dragon's chest, they wouldn't have attracted a second glance.

Questions were asked, and readily answered "both by the humans \_and\_ the dragon, much to the surprise of the growing crowd. Contrary to what many expected, the dragon's voice, though deep and resonant, bore none of the roaring or growling overtones popularized in so many movies. In fact, close your eyes and you could almost imagine it was a deep-voiced human speaking (if you ignored the drawn-out sibilants).

Once again, the wonder of discovery sent fear screaming into the shadows. By the time the local constabulary came by to investigate garbled reports about something "big as a house and bright red" on the beach, there was nothing to be found except some oddly-shaped depressions in the sand, rapidly disappearing under the rising tide.

The encounters continued, becoming more frequent and lasting longer, always following the same pattern: Various species of dragon would appear in seemingly random locations as if conjured, always in the presence of at least one human companion. Those curious (and adventurous) enough to approach would be warmly welcomed, their questions answered, and they would be asked to do nothing more in return than listen to a story about a certain island just off the northern coast of Norway.

All listened. Most believed, and understood, particularly when the dragon involved did some of the talking. They were as outraged as any sane person would be over the situation, and agreed to help in any way they could.

Some refused to listen and fled in terror. They wasted no time in notifying any authority or news media who would listen.

While most such reports got no further than the desk sergeant of the local police or the head producer of a given news outlet (along with much commentary about 'full-moon specials'), a few triggered keywords in Internet monitors and were forwarded to certain high-ranking UNEC officials. These officials, in accordance with their standing orders, passed them up to UNEC HQ, flagged for Secretary Gupta's attention.

It was at this point the proverbial excrement collided with the rotary impeller.

Encrypted messages started flying between Gupta's private terminal and Benn Hyse. The Secretary was most diligent in reminding the island's chieftain about the terms of the current treaty,

particularly the consequences of breaking it.

The third such contact, coming in March, took the form of a video call. "We must have gotten him pretty riled" Benn told Sam, Silence and Kate, as the time for the call approached. "He hates using anything but E-mail, or working through his flunkies, where we're concerned. Watch, and you'll see what I mean. Stay out of camera range, though." His grin was more than a little wicked. "Myst and I are going to give him the full treatment."

Kate laughed, and clouted the chief on his shoulder. "You're vicious. Both of you" she said, though her gaze was full of amusement and anticipation. Sam traded a look with Silence, who rumbled her own amusement. "You will ssee" she said. "It iss not the firsst time our human leader and Mysst have done thiss."

As they entered the meeting hall, Benn and his crimson companion took center stage in front of a meter-wide monitor with an incongruously small camera lens at the top. The call began precisely on the stroke of 13:00, local, a high-def image of Gupta seated at his office desk flashing into being on the screen.

Contrary to his normal dark suit, and much to Sam's surprise, Gupta was wearing a UNEC flag officer's uniform. It presented a garish, almost comical, contrast against the simple greens and browns of Benn's tunic and trews, the only sign of his rank a gold wrist band bearing an intricately-worked dragon's head with citrines for eyes.

As the call progressed, Sam found himself fighting to keep from laughing out loud. Though Myst spoke only a few words of formal greeting, apparently required by protocol, his huge lantern-yellow eyes remained locked, unblinking, on the screen. He stayed so still he could have been a statue, his only movement the flexing of his chest muscles as he breathed.

The effect on Gupta was far more pronounced. Barely a couple of minutes into the call, his brow was glistening with sweat and he'd developed enough muscular tics to make a Tourette's patient look placid. Despite this, he managed to keep his voice steady.

"Chief Hyse" he said, carefully, shuffling several papers into a folder. "I must remind you the number of these reports is growing. I have received repeated assurances, in times past, the... beings... you choose to live with are capable, with human assistance, of understanding the restrictions spelled out in your country's treaty with UNEC." His gaze flicked briefly to Myst, who showed no reaction whatsoever, then back to the chief with a barely-suppressed shudder. "Has a problem of understanding developed in spite of these assurances?"

"Not to my knowledge, Mr. Secretary" Hyse replied, apparently oblivious to the man's discomfort. "I must remind you, however, of several scientifically proven facts. First and foremost, while our draconic \_friendsâ€\_" Sam nodded at the emphasis. "â€"certainly are capable of understanding the restrictions you refer to, they are not our slaves, nor are they dependent on us in any way.

"We cannot \_make\_ them do anything they truly do not wish to do, nor can we prevent them from exercising their own free will. Their

association with us exists due to mutual curiosity, trust and affection." Gupta paled visibly at this, but Benn didn't even pause. "I have noticed no unusual absence of dragons from our island, nor have there been any reports of such from the other enclaves.

"Second: I would like to remind you of a large volcanic island, near Old Berk. It is still, according to intelligence which \_your office provided, home to a very healthy population of wild dragons who, apparently, up until now, have been perfectly happy to stay put and have as little to do with humans as possible. This island was, in fact, ceded to the dragons themselves as a private reserve, by a secret treaty executed in the late 1980's between Norway's monarchy and Berk's leaders of that time."

Sam's gut clenched. He hadn't expected Hyse to play their 'hole card' so soon.

"My third point: Dragons are \_naturally curious,\_ as you well know. If they become curious enough about environments other than the one they were hatched in, they will start to explore and, like migratory birds, they are capable of covering enormous distances.

"They're not dangerous unless threatened. Is not the same true of other large and potentially dangerous creatures, such as horses and elephants? If one approaches a wild dragon, openly, without threat, the chances of surviving the encounter are very high. Indeed, the chances of making friends with the dragon involved are just as high. If the dragon isn't interested, they will simply fly away."

Gupta's tone was brittle. "So what you are telling me, Chief Hyse, is you believe these... events... are due to wild dragons which Berk has no control over?" He scowled fiercely. "I find it difficult to believe these... \_things\_... are as harmless as you claim!"

A soft growl issued from Myst's throat at this. The skin along the Nightmare's neck and head glistened for a moment, then shimmered with bluish flame which went out almost as quickly as it flared, leaving a few wisps of white smoke in its wake.

The Secretary flinched, visibly. "That is precisely what I refer to!" He shouted, as he pointed squarely at Myst. "How does one defend against something which can set itself on fire without harm, yet incinerate all around it?! Shiva Herself could not do worse!"

"If one does not threaten, there is no need for defense" Benn replied, calmly, resting a hand on his companion's neck, then holding up the same hand towards the camera, palm out. "Do you see any burn or injury, sir?"

Gupta shook his head. "That is not my point, Chief Hyse, and youâ€"

Hyse's voice and manner suddenly changed, taking on a note of command which reminded Sam so much of his Basic Training drill sergeant, he snapped to attention. "Answer the question, sir! Do you see any burn or injury?"

Stunned into silence, eyes widening, Gupta shook his head. "Among these so-called 'incident' reports" Hyse continued, in the same tone,

"has there been a \_single one\_ which reported harm to anyone?"

Gupta's mouth worked, but no sound emerged. "I'll take that as a 'No'" Benn said, his voice dropping back to normal. "Mr. Secretary, it is certainly true humans can be injured or killed by animals, including dragons. Many people have been attacked by sharks, mauled to death by lions or tigers, gored by bulls or bitten by toxic reptiles and insects.

"However, many more people have been interacting peacefully with wild animals for millennia. Look at the natives of Micronesia and various other Pacific islands, who depend on the sea for food: They've had their fishing helped by pods of dolphins for longer than I think anyone has kept track of, and dolphins are certainly among the animals which can injure or kill a human.

"If that's not enough, look at the \_mahouts\_ in Thailand and your own native country: How many centuries have they been working with elephants, creatures which could kill a human as easily as you could squash a mosquito? How many people, Mr. Secretary, are hurt or killed \_every year\_ by taking a fall in the bathtub or down a flight of stairs?

"Even in this age of personal aircars, how many pedestrians or bicyclists are hurt or killed through collision with ground vehicles? How many suffer because of abusing alcohol or other drugs? \_How many still use tobacco?\_"

Sam had never seen the Secretary go from pale to enraged so quickly in his life. His skin darkened perceptibly, and his mouth tightened. Still, Benn wasn't done with him. "You are right to be concerned about these incidents, sir. I am as well. Our outside contacts have standing orders to try, as best they can, to persuade any wild dragon they may encounter to return to their island, New Berk, or the nearest enclave.

"Failing that, their orders are to do whatever they feel necessary to protect public safety. By necessity, that means educating the public about dragons, especially what \_not\_ to do around them. How can we insist humans stay clear when the dragon may not want to? Our credibility would be destroyed, increasing the chance of injury on both sides.

"No matter what you may personally believe, Mr. Secretary, you are dealing with creatures who have free will, and who can think and reason at least as well as humans."

Myst suddenly moved. He parked his massive head directly over Benn's, and opened his mouth. "\_Mosst\_ humanssss" he hissed, eyeing the Secretary as if he were a bothersome insect.

Gupta spluttered with outrage, and a vein above one eye throbbed visibly. "You... \_dare...!\_"

"No disrespect whatsoever intended, Mr. Secretary" Benn replied, in the blandest tone Sam had ever heard. "If there's nothing else, sir, I have pressing business I must attend to. Good day to you."

Benn tapped a switch on the monitor. It went dark, then displayed the

New Berk Coat of Arms with the legend 'CONNECTION TERMINATED' blinking below it in yellow letters.

Kate started applauding. Silence let out a triumphant roar which all but shook the rafters. Sam couldn't decide whether to join the applause, look worried, or laugh, while Benn got up from his stool and eyed Myst with an exasperated look. "Was that really necessary?" He asked, hands on hips. "Yes, the man's a pompous ass, but he's a powerful one. Get him mad enough, and he may do something rash!"

The Nightmare snorted, twin wisps of steam curling up from his nostrils. "I, for one" he said, slowly, "am tired of hiding, of flying only in 'ssafe' sskiess. Thiss iss why I overflew that boat lasst year. It iss alsso why I agreed to Ssam'ss plan â€" asz did you."

He looked straight at his human friend. "The ssmallesst of our people, the oness you call 'Terrible Terrorss,' are fearrless and cunning when protecting themsselvess or thosse they care about, even if their opponent iss many timess their ssizze." He flicked a forked tongue at the now-darkened screen. "He iss nothing more than our many-timess-larger opponent. If we are fearless and cunning, we will conquer him."

Benn sighed and leaned against the dragon's head, idly scratching the soft hide on Myst's lower jaw. "I know, big stuff, I know... it's just this particular opponent is armed with things I think even a pair of nesting Terrors would think twice about challenging."

The dragon flipped his tail-tip back and forth, his equivalent of a shrug, and purred. Sam spoke up as realization dawned. "Benn, he can't do anything more than bluster."

The chief looked at him, doubt mixing with hope in his eyes. "It's simple" Sam continued. "I may never have gotten past Acting Sergeant, but I was with UNEC for a good many years. No matter what he's told you, not even the Secretary-General can order a military strike without running it past the Security Council and General Assembly, unless there's a direct and immediate threat to human survival. He'd have to prove such a threat exists, and he can't do that without hard evidence."

"Evidence which doess not exisst, and which he cannot create without letting the hatchlingss out of the nesst" Silence put in.

"Exactly" Kate added, seeing the logic of it. "Even if he can call in a few favors from the RAF, or whoever else he's got in his pocket, what, exactly, are they going to strike at without risking civilian lives? And where? Sliding Scales has put our people in key spots all over the world. UNEC's jurisdiction is global only within the wilderness reserves they're responsible for, dealing with poachers and illegal hunting, and only where protection of endangered wildlife is concerned. He'd have to make a convincing case the dragons were a dangerous and 'invasive' species to make anyone else sit up and take notice."

Ben produced a sad smile. "You've all got a good point" he said. "And it's probably true he wouldn't try to take a poke at New Berk or the other reserves. We have our own friends in high places, otherwise we

could never have put Sliding Scales into operation."

"What you're forgetting" he continued, the smile fading, "is Dragon Island. It has no human population outside of the occasional observers we send there, with permission from the dragons themselves. It's nearly impossible to approach by sea outside of a single, twisting, rock-bound channel. It's marked on the charts as a restricted nature preserve under Norway's sole jurisdiction and volcanically active. This gives us leverage to keep outsiders away on all fronts.

"Here's the problem: It's also so far off the beaten path, no one would think twice if a military squadron had, say, a 'training accident' there with live ammunition. If Gupta becomes convinced his problems are all coming from there..."

He let the words hang for a moment, then continued. "I felt I had to make a quick decision, divert his attention away from the idea Berk was involved." He winced and shook his head. "I may have done it too well."

A loud snort from Silence startled them all. "Humanss!" She said, eyes flicking skyward. "For all the yearss we have lived together, you sstill underesstimate uss."

Benn looked at her, clearly puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I'll second that" Sam added, his gaze flicking between Silence and Myst. "Is there something you're not telling us?"

"Nothing you need to worry about" Silence replied, smugly. "It iss enough to ssay we know the Nesst-Home and itss ssecretss better than any human."

"For now" Myst added, his tone suddenly as commanding as Benn's had been, "you musst move quickly into the next phasszze. The gathering Ssam sspoke of iss ten ssunss away. Consscentrate on that, and leave the Nesst-Home to uss."

Hyse's expression still held doubt, but he nodded. "If you say so..."

\* \* \*

><p>Tuesday, March 27th, 2091 dawned gray, mild and partly cloudy over Geneva. The air warmed quickly as the sun climbed higher, despite the persistent cloud cover, and the humidity rose just as quickly from 'tolerable' to 'stifling.'

The unseasonable heat, towering clouds and gusty winds caused much comment among the steady stream of delegates, observers and newscasters filing into the huge lobby of the Palace of Nations building for the 86th Assembly (and, just as important to many, the post-assembly anniversary party) of the UN Human Rights Commission. However, talk of the weather took a poor second to the topic of 'giant multicolored lizards.' A few even dared to use the 'D' word, though they did so out of range of sharp-eared reporters.

It seemed as though everyone had a story from their particular country. The Australian delegate went on at length to his UK



counterparts about 'clones of Nessie herself,' who had kept a surfing competition shark-free " and then cavorted in the waves right along with the contestants, before vanishing as quickly as they'd appeared. "I think the judges were ready to give them a medal or two" he said, with a chuckle.

The United States delegate had her own tale. An airboat tour operator in the Florida Everglades had discovered some unexpected additions on his normal route, in the form of a pair of young Night Furies. The pair were so close in color and pattern to black leopards that the boat's pilot had mistaken them for such at a distance.

The misconception was quickly dispelled when the boat came within ten meters of the mangrove tree where the pair were perched. Nearly thirty seconds of stunned silence ensued while humans and dragons traded curious stares, broken only by mutters of "What the hell are they?!" "Are they real?" and "Why's Disney putting animatronics in the Everglades?!"

Astonishment soon gave way to frantic activity. Cameras clicked and whirled like hyperactive castanets. Even the pilot, as experienced a swamp-crawler as anyone who had ever called the 'glades home, was too enthralled to notice an overly-curious alligator, leisurely swimming straight towards them.

One of the dragons was more alert. Startled shouts and a scream or two sounded from their audience as the youngster spat a small blue fireball across the airboat's bow. It landed squarely in front of the 'gator, erupting in a cloud of water and steam and causing the huge reptile to rear halfway out of the water in a frantic effort to escape. It beat a hasty retreat, leaving a very visible wake.

Any lingering doubts the boat's riders may have had about the reality of the pair were blown away when they leaped from their perch and glided over to the boat. Fortunately, being a retired rescue craft, it was easily large enough for the two to land comfortably on the bow.

The one who'd chased off the 'gator sat up on his haunches, stared straight at the pilot and said, into the second round of utter silence, "You sshould be more careful."

After two of the female passengers had been revived from their fainting spells, the draconic pair had been " cautiously " welcomed aboard. The remaining social ice was broken quickly enough by the human children, all of whom were immediately on their best behavior and thrilled to meet the objects of many childhood stories. The boat headed home without further incident, the dragons taking wing and disappearing back into the 'glades just before it docked.

No matter what the story, no matter what country it came from or which dragons were involved, the same questions were on the mind of every delegate: Who? What? Why? Where? Which? When? How?

So intense were the discussions, hardly anyone noticed when thunder rumbled through the air, nor when the rain started down in torrents. A couple of people did a double-take at the arrival of the Norwegian delegation, given the size of the entourage and the overly tall cloaked-and-hooded figure in their midst, but no one bothered them as

they made a beeline for the elevators.

Had anyone been within range to hear, they might have caught an Irish-accented voice in the group, muttering "...can't believe that worked..."

\* \* \*

><p>"The Assembly" intoned Tendai Jenko, the president of the Human Rights Commission, "recognizes the Honorable Frida Nerison of Norway. Ambassador Nerison?"<p>

A lean, silver-haired woman stood up from behind the table bearing the NORWAY placard and made her way to the podium. Although clearly of advanced age, she moved with the grace and confidence of someone barely into their third decade. Her ice-blue eyes, bearing more than a hint of good humor and mischief, swept over the room as she ascended to the stage.

"Thank you, Mr. President" she began, with a courteous nod in his direction as he took his own seat towards the back of the stage, along with the Secretary-General. Her expression grew serious as she turned to face the room. "On what should be a truly happy occasion" she said, letting her gaze roam over the crowd, "I regret I must bring you news of oppression from my country, not of one but of \_two\_ indigenous peoples.

Muted sounds of surprise accompanied raised eyebrows. "These acts of oppression" she continued, "are made worse by their source, and by the fact those oppressed have done nothing more than champion the cause of peaceful coexistence since the ninth century."

More surprise rippled through the room, accompanied by baffled looks. One could practically see question marks boiling out of the Assembly's collective heads.

"I have been empowered to speak on behalf of the oppressed" Nerison continued. The sparkle in her eyes was back, as a muffled commotion started at the stage's rear entrance. "However, I believe we all know there is no one better qualified to speak of such things than a properly-vetted member of the oppressed. She is with us today. Let the record show she has my country's full sponsorship and authority to speak.

"Assuming, of course..." And she turned to face the President and Secretary-General with a gentle smile. "There is no objection?"

The President looked puzzled, but open. "The floor is yours, Ambassador. Let your representative speak."

Secretary Gupta's gaze, however, bore more than a hint of suspicion "and" warning. However, as he couldn't think of any way to publicly override the President without raising more questions than he wanted to answer, he merely nodded.

"Thank you, gentlemen" she said, her smile growing as she turned back to her expectant audience. "I present to the Assembly, Silence, Guardian of Memories for her people."

A soft rumble of expectant muttering rose as Nerison stepped back a

pace or two. A tall, figure, cloaked and hooded, made its way out of the shadowed entrance and onto the stage. The figure moved with a slow, shuffling gait, as though it were suffering from some long-borne illness, though there was nothing hesitant about its steady progress.

The figure reached the podium, held still for a long moment " and, with a whoosh of displaced air, threw off the cloak with her wings. Large pewter-toned eyes in a rounded, black-scaled head surveyed the audience, riveting every person they caught to their chair.

Gasps of astonishment and a few hastily-muffled screams sounded throughout the room as Silence braced her forepaws on the podium and neatly refolded her wings. And yet, there was no panic, no mad rush for the doors (although a squad of UN Security guards suddenly made their presence known in the background, hands on the grips of their stunners).

Gupta's voice rose above the muttering as he stood up, his face pale and tight. "Mr. President" he said, in a flat voice. "This commission addresses human rights issues! No court in the world has ever established any precedent of similar rights for animals!" He practically spat the last word. "Sir, I must ask that Ambassador Nerison be declared out of order and removed from this meeting, along with her... pet..."

Silence's gaze locked on him. There was no hostility or disgust in it. If anything Nerison thought, I think she actually feels sorry for him...

"If what I have learrned in my time among humansss iss corrrrect" Silence said, "we arre all 'animalss' in one form or another. Have not yourr own sscholarss proven humansss arre desscended from the Great Apess? Even if you werre not, the matterss I musst bring before your Counsscil consscern all your people aszz well aszz mine, no matter where we live."

Gupta's face darkened. "I will not" he said, tightly, "argue human origins with a raakshasa!"

"Then it iss fortunate I am a dragon" Silence shot back.

Nerison barely stifled her laughter. Jenko's eyebrows went straight up, though he managed to keep his expression neutral. Every other delegate immediately fell silent. Their expressions ranged from shock and disbelief to the broad smile of a child who has just had their fondest dream come true. It got so quiet, Nerison could hear whispers in multiple languages, all coming from the delegates' earpieces as Silence's words were translated. She suppressed a second chuckle as several whispered urgently for repeats.

As the first shock wore off, delegates started muttering among themselves. The muttering soon swelled into a noisy debate. Nerison couldn't make out all of it, but she quickly realized who would be 'dragon friendly' and who would need more work. For starters, the Italian delegates looked horrified, and were arguing back and forth with increasingly wild gestures. The Chinese, in stark contrast, were all wearing broad smiles and sat as still as statues despite the growing chaos.

The President tried restoring order. His efforts, though sincere, achieved little. Finally, Nerison whispered something to him and nodded towards Silence. The Night Fury promptly lifted her head and spat a small bright-blue fireball towards the ceiling. It exploded against a concrete-shrouded steel beam with a shower of multicolored sparks and a bang which rattled the windows and sent at least a dozen water glasses tumbling. A small cloud of scorched dust drifted down from the otherwise-intact beam, falling mostly on the Italian delegates who were now " silently " looking back and forth between the podium and the ceiling, mouths agape.

"Now that I have your attention once again" the President said, firmly, "I would remind you all of the fact there is nothing in our charter which requires a speaker be of any particular species to address this body. Nor, in all fairness" he continued, holding up one hand as several delegates started to protest, "is there anything which specifically allows it. I believe it is safe to say this... appearance... is without precedent.

"\_However\_" he continued, raising his voice to override the few remaining dissenters. "The human race as a whole has made multiple efforts, through agencies such as NASA, ESA and NRAO, to seek out and invite other intelligent races beyond our own to visit our world and \_meet us\_. How many of us, in this room and around the world, have looked up and wondered 'Are we alone?'"

He smiled, ruefully, and nodded at Silence and Nerison. "I believe, based on recent events which we are all familiar with, and the... evidence... standing before us at this moment, this question has been most emphatically answered in a most unexpected manner! In any event, Ambassador Nerison has followed our governing procedures, with regard to guest speakers, to the letter.

"Her speaker of choice, no matter her species, has clearly demonstrated intelligence, rational thought, and a very adequate command of our language. With this in mind, I ask the Envoy Silence"

"Guardian Silence" Nerison said, softly. The President nodded. "With this in mind" he repeated, "I ask the Guardian Silence to please continue."

The Night Fury bowed her head to the President, then turned back to the now-silent delegates. "Humanss of all tribess" she began, her rich bass voice filling the hall even without the aid of the sound system. "I greet you and thank you for lisstening. I wissh to sshare with you a sstory of my people, one which hasz been passsed down frrom the time of the human tribe you knew asz 'Vikingss.' It iss a tale of one young Viking, all but outcasst frrom hiss own home, who wasz not afrraid to aszk quesstionss otherrss would not"

With all the attention focused on the first non-human species ever to address any UN Assembly, no one noticed when Secretary Gupta motioned an aide over and whispered urgently in the man's ear. The aide's expression remained utterly neutral as he nodded and slipped out of the room.

It took a little over an hour. Not a single voice was raised in question or protest the entire time, though Nerison noted several delegates squirming more than once at mention of the Crusades and

Spanish Inquisition. Silence, though, was as near to the Perfect Speaker as was possible, given the obvious difference in species and culture: Her speech gave simple facts, neither pulling punches nor delivering judgment, yet riveting every person in the room to their seats with the tale's depth and clarity.

Her closing words, though, sent a ripple of unease and outrage through the room: "Our community attempted to reveal our existence once before" Silence said, a note of sadness in her voice. "Despite all the work of our past human leader, Lannce Hysse and his mate, Roana, of my grand-dam Ssubstance and her mate R          , Lannce's adopted Night Fury son, Sspring, of the past leaders of the country you call Norway  "

She dropped from the podium, suddenly, and spun to glare at Gupta. "Despite all," she continued. "You have allowed \_this one\_ human, Secretary Gupta, to turn you from the truth of what \_can be, \_and condemn my people to a slow death!"

The Secretary-General paled, but did not look away. The President's eyes widened. Sounds of shock and disbelief rippled throughout the room as Silence turned and leaned against the podium once again. "Dragon exists. We have existed at least as long as humans, for even our oldest tales tell of your people. We ask nothing of humans other than to accept our presence and let us lead our own lives.

"You already know, through your own Guardians of Memories and... what is the word?" She glanced over at Frida Nerison, who stepped quickly forward and whispered to her. "Thank you   " 'new media'   " that our two peoples can and do become friends. I would not be before you now were it not for the help of my own human friends.

"Other human leaders of Hysse's and Substances' time recognized us as friends, allies, even equals, and sought peaceful coexistence for all. Is it so very difficult for you to do the same?"

She bowed her head once again. "Thank you for listening. Ambassador Nerison and I will now answer any questions..."

Before anyone else could so much as take a breath, Jenko spoke. "Guardian Silence" he began. "You have made a very serious accusation against a UN official. Do you understand what this means?"

"Clearly, sir" Silence replied. "Ambassador Nerison will agree, as will my other human friends."

Jenko turned to Nerison. "I do agree, Mr. President" she said, eyeing Gupta distastefully. "There is considerable suspicion among my delegation that Secretary Gupta has been waging a secret and private war of oppression  "

"Lies!" Gupta roared, jumping up from his seat. "I have upheld the duties of my office faithfully, without falsehood or misrepresentation! I cannot believe anyone in this room would believe this... this... chicanery over my own word as Secretary-General!"

The room lights suddenly dimmed. "Ladies, Gentlemen and Dragon" a voice boomed over the sound system. "Please direct your attention to the main screen for some special material..."

The screen in question glowed to life with a test pattern. As one, every eye in the room, human and dragon alike, turned to look. An old-fashioned film countdown appeared, flickered from '5' down to '2' and vanished with a single beep

and was promptly replaced with a ten-meter high image of Lieutenant Dashiell and the Secretary General in Dashiell's office, arguing, the sound of their voices filling the room with all the clarity of the best audio address system money could buy:

"\_Let Sam keep his memories\_" Dashiell was saying. "\_He's been fascinated by the possibility of dragons since before his first year at the Academy..."\_

The silence grew thicker as the footage progressed to its inevitable end. It was replaced by still images of the same news clips Kate had shown Sam months ago, Gupta's name and the story's outcome highlighted in each one.

The unseen voice, with a note of wry humor, added: "Copies of this material are available on YouTube, Wikileaks and, by now, probably every news desk from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe..."

The muttering started again. It grew swiftly into outraged voices calling, almost universally, for Secretary-General Gupta to step forward and explain himself. President Jenko, with some effort and many soundings of the room-filling electronic gong, managed to restore some semblance of order. "I assure you all" he said, firmly, "this matter will be promptly investigated! There will be a two-hour recess at this time."

The amplified sound of a gavel striking wood echoed through the room as Jenko turned to Nerison and Silence, who were standing calmly to one side. One figure, though, was conspicuous by its absence.

Jenko was not one to waste time on rhetorical questions. He raised a hand and signaled to the leader of the guard troop which had appeared earlier. The man hurried over and saluted, his glance flickering nervously over Silence. "Sir?"

"Seal this building, then find and detain Secretary Gupta" Jenko said, urgently. Then he turned back to Nerison and Silence. "Ambassador and ... Guardian: With due respect, why did you not alert me when the Secretary left? He knows the emergency exits as well as any of us."

Silence rumbled her amusement. "Have you never hunted?" Silence asked. Jenko shook his head slightly, still a bit bemused at conversing with a dragon. "You said it yourself, President Jenko" the Night Fury continued. "'We are not alone.' When prey does not know it is being hunted, it grows overconfident."

\* \* \*

><p>The 'prey' in question was, at that moment, hurrying down a long, hot, corridor, lit only at intervals by LED 'limpets' and the green

glow of EXIT signs with directional arrows. Smells of ozone and machine oil filled the humid air, along with the sounds of blowers, motors and relays. Sweat streamed down Gupta's face and his breath came in gasps, but he brushed aside the discomfort. There was no shame in retreat when faced with impossible odds. Yes, he may have lost a battle today, but it would be no less than a Pyrrhic victory for his enemies.<p>

Rage filled his vision with a red haze as he ran. \_Shiva take Dashiell's soul!\_ Gupta had not had the slightest clue the rebellious officer had left his recording system on after Shay had been debriefed. Worse, the footage had, somehow, gotten 'into the Wild,' as the IT techs liked to say.

Heavy footfalls echoed through the corridor behind him, accompanied by shouts of "UN Security! Stop where you are!"

Smirking, Gupta sped up and activated his wrist comm: "Mohinder! Status!" he barked.

The voice which replied was vastly reassuring in its utterly calm tone, the voice of his most trusted assistant and pilot. \_"Throwback is proceeding on schedule, sahib. One hour."\_

"Excellent! Be ready for immediate departure! I am almost at the exit!" \_And not a moment too soon\_ he thought, as the footfalls and shouts got louder behind him. The green-and-red glare of the EMERGENCY EXIT sign was just ahead. Thirty meters, twenty, ten...

Daylight blinded him as he crashed through the door, heedless of the ear-piercing alarm set off by its opening. The rain had stopped and the air was cool, fresh and damp, heavy with humidity. Barely twenty meters ahead, a sleek black air limo, doors emblazoned with the UNEC crest, hovered just above the ground, its running lights throwing garish reflections off the wet pavement. He bolted down the wide stairs towards it, yelling into his wrist comm for Mohinder to open the door.

Something hard and rope-like caught him neatly across the back of his knees. His legs promptly buckled and, had it not been for the safety rails bordering the stairs, the fall could have been a lot worse. As it was, he landed hard enough to knock himself breathless, pain searing along his left hand and wrist where he'd grabbed the railing.

He forced himself back to his feet, cursing under his breath at the sharp complaints from his injuries, and limped towards the car as fast as he could manage. A squad of UN guards emerged from the tunnel exit, pointed, and started towards him.

"Here, sir, let me get the door for you" said a half-familiar voice. A firm hand caught his arm a moment later. "Thank you" he gasped, as he straightened up to get a better look at his helper€

And froze in utter shock at the sight of an all-too-familiar blue-eyed face, framed by russet hair and a neatly-trimmed goatee. "Shay" he gasped.

Pain exploded in Gupta's skull as he went sprawling all over again,

blood streaming from nose and lips. "That, sir" Shay said, ignoring his own bleeding knuckles, "was for Lieutenant Dashiell. With all due respect, of course."

Suddenly, there came a blur of motion from the driver's side of the car as Mohinder sprang out, leveled his gun at Sam and fired. The Ranger howled with pain and went down, one hand clutching at his right side. Mohinder, quite properly, wasted no more time on the man, but ran around to help his employer up and into the limo. "Hurry, sahib" he said, as he reached out to open the passenger door. "They areâ€"

What they were and what they were about to do, neither man found out. A two-meter long streak of mottled green shot past Gupta's head and collided solidly with Mohinder's face, sending him staggering back, the gun falling from his hand.

All Gupta could do was watch, bemused, as Mohinder struggled to dislodge the Terrible Terror, jaws clamped firmly to the man's substantial nose and growling for all she was worth.

The next few moments went by in a pain-filled haze for Sam. His side felt like it had been slammed with a baseball bat, and his shirt was soaked through with blood. He managed to pull himself up to a sitting position with his good arm, watching with considerable satisfaction as two guards handcuffed Gupta and led him away. Three more surrounded Mohinder and his scaly assailant, looking uncertain. Finally, one of them pulled out his stunner.

Sam took a deep breath, wincing at the flare of pain it caused, and shouted "Niho! Enough!"

The Terror froze in mid-growl, blinking. Then, much to the relief of guards and victim alike, released her hold and shot towards Sam. She scurried up the stairs and half-leaped, half-flew the last couple of meters to land on his chest, chirping with concern and sniffing cautiously at his wound.

Sam stifled a yell as her paws pressed into bruised ribs. "Ow! Easy, Niho, it's not bad" he said, trying to protect the most painful spots from her investigation.

This drew a long, measuring look from the little dragon, followed by a derisive snort. The word \_Hurt! \_echoed through his skull, followed a moment later by \_No move! \_Delivered in a no-nonsense tone any doctor would have envied.

More guards arrived, followed by at least half the delegates, President Jenko and Silence. The Night Fury bounded quickly to Sam's side, eyeing him worriedly. "Who hasz harmed you?" she hissed, looking around furiously for the vet's assailant. Before he could take a breath to reply, Niho trilled, motioning with her tail to where a paramedic was tending to Mohinder's face. Silence's ear-flaps rose as she rumbled a reply, then turned back to Sam.

"It sseemss" she said, the corners of her mouth twitching upwards, "your ssmall guardian hasz lived up to Mysst's desscription."

The guards had a crowd-control perimeter set up in record time. A pair of ambulances were let through moments later, carrying more



paramedics. Sam found it odd to be on the receiving end of a diagnostic scan, for a change, though he was very grateful when the young (and very attractive) golden-haired medic declared the bullet wound to be through-and-through.

"Clean entry, clean exit" she said, as she applied Dermaseal patches to both wounds and administered painkiller and antibiotics. "You were lucky, sir, but you do have a cracked rib. Follow up with your regular doctor, and avoid any heavy labor or exercise for at least the next two weeks."

Silence, who had been carefully observing the whole procedure, startled the medic by asking "Doess that mean no flying?"

The girl blinked rapidly, took in Silence's stature and partly-extended wings, then stammered "I... flying? By aircar?"

Sam tried to laugh, then ended up half-choking as sore muscles made their presence felt. Silence snorted in disgust, then carefully lowered herself almost flat to the ground. "Ssam. On." she said.

He eyed her uncertainly. "Without a saddle?"

The Night Fury's expression spoke volumes. Sam's memory flashed back to an old two-D movie he'd seen in his teen years, automatically paraphrasing a famous line about not needing any 'steenking bodes.'

Although the flight lasted less than two minutes, it left a certain medic with what she would, for the rest of her long life, call "the most inspiring thing I've ever seen."

The peace gained from the flight was, unfortunately, short-lived. President Jenko and Ambassador Nerison intercepted them as Silence landed precisely in the same spot she'd taken off from. The President looked downright grim, while Nerison looked nearly as pale as driven snow. "What?" Sam asked as he got down.

Jenko sighed, heavily. "It seems former Secretary Gupta had a back-up plan. He called it 'Throwback.' A single Viper, carrying a Coldfire-class fusion bomb, lifted off from Yorkshire Base a little more than an hour ago. The pilot was ordered to fly under Code Black conditions: Radio silence, no transponder or telemetry, and radar-invisibility. Sealed orders, as well, which means the pilot would not know his target himself until the orders were opened."

An icicle substituted itself for Sam's spine. Code Black meant more than stealth flight: Orders issued under the code could not be countermanded, even by the person who issued them.

Before he could breathe a word, though, Silence asked, sharply, "What iss thiss weapon? What can it do?"

"Plenty" Sam muttered, through clenched teeth and tightly-shut eyes. "Silence, imagine your biggest, most powerful fireball. Now, imagine that same fireball about ten thousand times stronger. That's what a Coldfire bomb can deliver."

Silence's eyes all but bugged. She turned away, hissing and rumbling up a storm in her native language, tail lashing, ear-flaps tight to

her skull. Sam felt an odd sort of relief that he couldn't understand her words as he turned back to the President. "Sir, where in blazes did he even \_get\_ a Coldfire?! Those things were all supposed to be scrapped years ago!"

Jenko made a small, ironic smile. "Even if you had not provided us your debriefing recording, Ranger Shay, possession of an illegal fusion device would have been enough to remove Gupta from office. My guess is he gathered the parts, a few at a time, over a number of years."

Sam blinked, his thoughts stumbling over each other for a moment. "Sir, it wasn't me who provided the recording. Honestly, I have no idea who did. I didn't think it would be admissible in open forum, so I didn't bother to give a copy to the AV techs."

It was Jenko's turn to blink in surprise. "Then it was Ambassador Nerison?" He said, glancing over at her. His eyebrows went straight up as she shook her head. "It wasn't me or any of my aides, sir" she replied. "I wasn't even aware of its existence until it was projected for us."

Jenko rolled his eyes skyward. "Another question among many" he sighed.

"Sir" Sam continued, getting his thoughts back in order. "The Viper carrying the bomb â€" Do we know its target?"

Nerison nodded, unhappily. "Dragon Island. More specifically, straight down the throat of its volcano!"

Sam felt suddenly sick. "Saint Blaise Above" he finally managed to gasp out. "The man's completely bonkers! That kind of blast would take out the whole island! Don't even get me started on how big a tsunami it could cause!"

"Worse" Nerison said. "There's better than a forty percent chance the resulting shock wave could wake up the Pacific Ring of Fire."

Sam paled. The Ring of Fire was a huge string of interlinked ocean trenches, volcanic belts and geologic plates. It stretched over 40,000 kilometers, in a rough horseshoe shape, beginning at New Zealand. It continued northeast from the island, then jogged sharply west just north of the Tonga Trench. It turned northeast again in Indonesia, at the Java Trench and Krakatoa, and continued in an east-northeast arc through Japan and into the Aleutians.

Around the mid-point of Alaska, the Ring turned southeast and continued all the way down the western side of the North and South American continents, ending in the ocean a few hundred kilometers west of Argentina's Higgins National Park.

"We are making every attempt to contact the pilot" Jenko added, hurriedly. "Three more Vipers have been scrambled to intercept, but it is not likely they can reach him in timeâ€"

A sudden whoosh of wind nearly bowled them all over as Silence leaped into the air. Before Sam or the others had recovered their senses, she had landed on the building's roof. A moment later, two colorful streaks zoomed by as Nalu and Niho flew to join her.

All three dragons appeared to confer for a moment. Then, as one, they turned to face north-northwest, sat up on their haunches, touched their wings together and closed their eyes. "What are they doing?" Jenko asked, looking back and forth between Nerison and Sam.

"Not a clue, sir" Nerison said. "Prayer? Meditation? Honestly, I wouldn't blame any of them if they were planning a counterattack. A Night Fury's fireball packs quite a punch. That little demonstration she gave earlier was the dragon equivalent of, say, a popgun."

Sam didn't think it was possible for the President to look more worried. Somehow, he managed it. "Ambassador" he asked, his tone flat and utterly calm, "Are you trying to tell me we may be going to war with these... beings?"

Nerison's silence spoke volumes. Suddenly, the vet was distracted by other matters, namely a soundless roar which seemed to swell up all around his head. He staggered, his balance fleeing for cover, as the not-sound washed over him like the mother of all ocean waves... No, more like the mother of all rugby crowds, all cheering at the top of their collective lungs as their team scored the winning goal... then again, perhaps it was like the roar of a thousand thrust turbines at full power inside an echo chamber...

Outside the maelstrom, he was dimly aware of hands catching him as he slumped over. Urgent voices called his name, called for medics, but none of that mattered. There was only one thing which mattered at this moment: Warn the others! Images flickered through his mind too quickly to follow, though he thought he saw the outline of a Viper fighter, followed by a rocky cavern lit with a sullen orange glow, a glow which brightened abruptly into eye-searing brilliance

As suddenly as it had hit, the pressure was gone. His ears still rang with the aftereffect, but his balance returned quickly enough. "Sam?" Nerison asked, anxiously. "Are you OK?"

He nodded, a bit shakily, then managed to get to his feet. A leathery flapping noise alerted him to the presence of the three dragons as they landed nearby. They were all panting, as if they'd flown a marathon. Silence met Sam's gaze and said, "What can be done, hasz been done."

Jenko frowned, then looked at Sam. "What does she mean?"

"I think, sir" the vet replied, hope beginning to peek out from behind what had been a thick wall of gloom, "she means it's time for the hardest part."

Nerison got it first, and nodded. "Waiting."

## 16. Chapter 16

\_Here we go... The last chapter, epilogue, etc. In addition to the acknowledgements at the bottom, I want to extend my deepest thanks to all my readers for their time, the reviews and other comments. I sincerely hope I don't disappoint with the ending.  
><em>

**\*\*The Dragonwing Effect\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 16\*\***

"\_Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds you plant."\_

\_(Robert Louis Stevenson)\_

It was the first time Sam had seen the innards of a UN 'Situation Room' and, though he heartily wished it were under different circumstances, his newly-developed 'techy' side found it fascinating. He was surprised at how closely it resembled photos he'd seen of NORAD's 'war room,' buried deep under Cheyenne Mountain.

The far wall was dominated by a set of five huge display screens. Maps, charts, lists, aerial photos, weather data and a myriad of other details flickered across them in an ever-changing flow of controlled chaos, responding to input from the operators at rows of consoles which stretched across the floor before the screens in neat lines. A constant buzz of quiet voices filled the cool, slightly pine-scented air, mingling with the hums and beeps of active electronics.

Right now, it was the image on the largest center screen which held everyone's attention: It showed a color map of the North Sea, Dragon Island's location marked with a red circle on the dark blue background. Approaching the circle from the southeast were four triangle-shaped icons. Three were huddled in neat formation, colored bright green, their position changing second to second according to their GNSS tracking.

The fourth, colored brilliant red, was a respectable distance ahead of the other three. Although its position changed along with the others, it was marked POS APPROX in red, which meant its course and position were based on computer extrapolation instead of real-time tracking.

The formation of three were closing on the single marker, though nowhere near quickly enough to suit Sam's state of mind. He was seated in the observer's gallery, just behind and slightly above the last row of consoles. To his right, Frida Nerison sat, outwardly just as calm and captivated by the activity as he was, though Sam suspected otherwise. \_Not every day you face the risk of a fusion explosion in your home territory\_ he thought, bitterly.

He glanced over to his left. Niho was curled comfortably in another chair, eyes shuttered to slits, tail dangling loosely out the gap between back and seat, looking for all the world like an oversized cat with scales. She had refused to go more than a meter away from Sam since he'd been shot. Nalu occupied the next chair over, curled into an identical pose.

Silence had, without any explanation, opted to fly back to the building's roof and remain there, holding the same statue-still pose as she had earlier, facing towards a distant home. Sam had been surprised when she refused his offer of company. "Thiss I musst do alone" she'd said. "Go with our other friendss."

Before he could so much as take a breath to reply, she was twenty

meters in the air and climbing fast. Puzzled, and a little hurt, Sam had allowed himself to be led inside. Food and drink had been offered and duly accepted, though he'd paid little attention to what he'd had. \_As long as it wasn't lutefisk\_ he mused.

He was startled out of his reverie by Nerison's gasp, followed by her hand locking onto his wrist. "Sam, look!" She said, urgently, gesturing to the center screen and its tracking map.

"Whatâ€" He said, then his eyes widened. Red concentric rings were spreading out from the center of the target marker. For one horrifying instant, he thought he was seeing the results of the Coldfire's detonation.

He realized, a moment later, there were no confirming signs. The red triangle, though over the southeast border of the island, was still not on top of its target marker. Also, no one was shouting about 'Detonation detected' or anything remotely similar. Instead, he was hearing mutters of "Subsurface quake" and "Two point one, new Richter."

"That's odd" Nerison said, as she let go of his wrist. "That whole area's been rock-solid for at least the past couple of centuries, and the volcano's been quiet as a kitten. The only thing which could have caused a subsurface quake would have been the Coldfire going offâ€"

"â€"which would have also set off a burst of radiation and an EMP" Sam added, just as confused. "Which would have stood out like a solar flare to the monitors."

As he spoke, the red triangle crossed over the target markerâ€"and kept right on going. The three green ones behind it split apart and started swooping in from different angles. An instant later, the red triangle and POS APPROX blinked out, to be replaced by a different marking which flashed alternating red and yellow along with a set of actual coordinates. A series of warning signals sounded, followed by comments along the lines of "â€"is down, repeat, Rogue One is down, confirm \_no detonation.\_ SAR beacon active, coordinates...\_"

Another controller: "Redeemer One, this is Geneva Control. Do you have a visual on Rogue One?"

Seconds ticked by with no response. The flashing marker was moving again, much more slowly than before, but steadily, back the way it had come. The three green triangles, which had slowed to just short of a hover, were back in formation and starting to follow the flashing marker at a respectable distance. "Redeemer One, do you copy Geneva? Rogue One is showing an active SAR beacon, but we still show movement. Can you confirm their status?"

The voice which came back was female, alto, and as full of puzzlement as the first controller: \_"Geneva Control, Redeemer One, that's affirmative. Rogue One is... uh, disabled, but still airborne... in a way..."\_

Sam swore he could see question marks pouring out of skulls all over the room. The pilot's voice was cool and confident, as any good soldier's would be, but there were overtones of disbelief, surprise,

and " was that \_humor?\_

"Redeemer One, repeat your last transmission" the controller said, impatiently. "What, exactly, do you mean 'in a way?'"

There came a long pause, followed by: \_"Geneva, Redeemer One. There's no way I can describe this..."\_ As she spoke, the marker for the lead craft swung around so it was in front of Rogue One's marker, moving slowly backwards as it moved forward.

Frida Nerison suddenly got up, walked over to one of the console operators, exchanged a few words, then accepted a spare headset. "Redeemer One, this is Northern Light" she said.

Sam could practically hear the pilot's spine going straight. \_"Northern Light, yes ma'am! Group Captain Bentley, flight leader, Redeemer One. What are your orders?"\_

Nerison eyebrows twitched. "At ease, Captain. Front camera on, show us what you've got."

The two screens to either side of the main one blanked out for a moment. Sam felt his jaw drop as they flicked back on, and the rest of the room went completely silent.

A huge flock of dragons of all kinds, from Terrible Terrors to the biggest of quad-wings, painted a multicolored contrast against the ever-present mist of the island, framed above by a broad line of cloudless blue sky. The island's central volcano was visible in the background, apparently none the worse for wear. According to telemetry from the beacon, the group was moving at a steady forty knots south-southeast.

Even more astonishing, at least to most of the room's population, was the sight of a single Viper fighter, badly battered, its starboard thrust turbine scorched, blackened and pockmarked with holes. The craft hung quietly in the air, swaying slightly, suspended between four sturdy ropes with wicked-looking grappling hooks on the business ends.

The other end of each rope was grasped firmly in the claws of a very smug-looking Monstrous Nightmare. The disabled ship's pilot, just visible through the canopy, had his helmet off and was staring around in utter astonishment, mouth agape.

All the tension Sam had built up suddenly drained out of him like a punctured balloon. Over the laughter which bubbled up uncontrollably from his innards, he heard Nerison tell the flight to land at Årland Air Base and await further orders. She was back at his side a moment later, grinning, then leaned down to offer him a hand up.

"Now that's a picture worth a lot more than a thousand words" she said, as he accepted her hand and levered himself back up. Nalu and Niho joined him an instant later, one on each shoulder, chirping excitedly. The single word \_Home!\_ Echoed joyfully in his head in full stereo as he followed Nerison into the elevator and back outside into a clear, warm afternoon

"and right into the leathery embrace of a very excited Night Fury. Nalu and Niho leaped up from his shoulders, squawking indignantly, as

Silence all but tackled Sam. "Whoa, lady!" He gasped out, caught between laughter and self-preservation. "I'll tell you all about it in justâ€"

"No need!" She said, joyfully, ear-flaps quivering, the two quarter-fins just behind her wings flipping open and shut erratically. "I Hearrd all!"

Before Sam could absorb this, he suddenly found himself on the receiving end of a very wet tongue. "Hey!" He protested. "Leave off, Silence! You know that doesn't wash out!"

\* \* \*

><p>The flight to ã-rland, though relatively short, gave Sam some time for a much-needed nap. He was jolted awake when the cargo hauler settled into a huge, brightly-lit hangar and, apparently, right into the middle of an impromptu party. He found himself, in short order, being congratulated by Benn Hyse, Kate, and the entire Berk council, thrown into conversations with one high-ranking official after another, and generally made much of by all concerned.<p>

One of the evening's biggest surprises came just as Sam had just finished making a pit stop, and was on his way back into the crowd. "Going somewhere, Mr. Shay?" A half-familiar voice said in a well-cultured English accent as a firm hand closed on his arm.

He turned, blinked in surprise â€" and felt his stomach churn. The man was about his height, dark-haired and clean-shaven, dressed in a RAF flight suit with Group Captain's insignia on the collar. His expression was neutral, though what Sam saw in the depths of those deep brown eyes made him more than a little edgy. "Do we know each other, sir?" Sam asked.

The pilot produced a small, wicked smile. "Group Captain Travis Alden. I believe we had a... minor altercation... in the air, just last year."

Time slowed to a crawl. Sam's innards decided now was a great time to try out for Olympic gold in gymnastics, and he felt a thin sheen of sweat break out on his brow.

Just as suddenly, the internal gloom-and-doom preparations ceased. \_No\_ he thought, as his jaw took a firmer line and he stood up a little straighter. \_If there was ever a time to stop running...\_

"Of course!" He said, grabbing the captain's free hand and shaking firmly. "I'm happy to see you're all right, Captain, and I hope you had a pleasant ride home today."

Alden returned the handshake, though his expression remained neutral. "I believe I still owe you for... various incidents... involving my squadron" he said, sipping from a flat, silvery flask.

Sam took a deep breath and locked gazes with the captain. "I did what I had to do at the time, sir, in the interest of getting to the truth. If you still feel I 'owe you' in light of all that's happened in the past day or two, then I'm sure we can find a quiet place outside to attend to the matter." He held the captain's gaze without flinching, though he could feel his guts quivering. Nalu and Niho

suddenly settled on his shoulders, one to each side, adding their steady gazes to the mix.

Alden eyed them all for a long moment, sipped again, said nothing. Suddenly, his face lit up with a grin. "I'll make you a deal, Shay. You tell me where you learned that flip-and-fire maneuver you pulled â€" honestly, I thought you and your ship were going to part company, TQ field or no â€" and I'll tell you how your scaly associates managed to knock down a state-of-the-art fighter running in full stealth mode."

Sam relaxed, as did the two dragons, and returned the grin. "Done. Given what you've seen today, it probably won't surprise you to hear I learned that from a dragon..."

He went on, explaining about Skye, though he carefully left out the time-travel portion. Alden was as good as his word in return. "I'd just started my run on the crater itself when the collision alarm went off. Before I could so much as glance at the radar, this glob of volcanic rock about the size of my head â€" still glowing red hot, no less â€" smashed into my starboard thrust turbine intake. The impact turned the rock to powder in an instant..."

The vet listened with growing amazement as Alden continued, describing his near-crash. "I was about to punch out when a pack of those huge reddish fellows â€" what do you call them?"

"Monstrous Nightmares" Sam replied. "Ironic name. They're neither, really. 'Gentle giants' would be more accurate."

Alden eyed him dubiously. "If you say so. In any case, the next thing I know my ship's caught by these hook-ended ropes, and... well, you know the rest." He took a last sip from his flask, capped it, and slipped it back into a pocket on his flight suit. His expression hardened. "You need to know something, Shay. I follow orders. By the same token, I don't take well to being lied to!"

Sam eyed him uncertainly. "Sir?"

"I wasn't told I was carrying a Coldfire" Alden said. "My orders described it as a conventional implosion device, designed to trigger a 'pressure relief' eruption. The package was set to detonate on impact, which means I might not have been able to get out of the way in time." He leaned against a support column and crossed his arms, clearly expecting a response.

Sam returned the look just as steadily. "Knowing what you do now, Captain" he said, quietly. "Would you still have dropped it?"

Alden blanched. "Good Lord, man, I'm not a monster! Coldfires were outlawed for good reasonâ€"

He trailed off, eyes widening. That was all the warning Sam had before a large black head nudged him from behind. "There you are!" Silence said, as she moved next to him. She was decked out in her strap of office. "Come with me, Ssam. Pressident Jenko and otherss want to sspeak with you." She eyed Alden curiously. "Who iss thiss?"

"Bless me" the captain muttered, his gaze riveted on the Night Fury.



"You \_do\_ speak!"

Sam snorted a laugh. "You noticed?" He made introductions as he and Alden followed Silence toward the far end of the hangar. "Skye was a Night Fury as well" he explained. "Their entire species are spectacular flyers, and could probably outmaneuver a hummingbird if they had to."

"Really?" Alden replied, his tone carrying just enough mock surprise. "I had no idea." Then, turning to Silence, he said "Might I trouble you for a demonstration, milady? When you can spare me a moment, of course."

Silence rumbled her amusement. "Name the time and place, but you must supply the hummingbird."

\* \* \*

><p>The cool ocean breeze brushed against Dr. Sam Shay's face, bringing the scents of pine, fir and salt. He leaned comfortably against a big fir tree and inhaled deeply, still waking up, and sipped from the chai tea latte in one hand. His rebuilt aircar, complete with its new tail number of NR2-BK10 was parked a hundred yards away, gleaming in the morning sun.<p>

Bright sunlight flashed off a larger metal mass as a UNEC construction flyer glided over the ridge, making for the work site below, the purr of its heavy-duty TQ generator modulating the rumble from its turbines. From higher up, excited chirping sounded as Nalu and Niho chased each other through the forest. Silence was curled comfortably on the grass next to him, eyes half-closed, apparently in meditation.

The weeks since the UN conference had been a whirl of non-stop activity. Sam turned his head to eye the new lieutenant's bars pinned to his fresh Ranger's uniform, still not quite able to believe he'd let himself be drafted into a Command position. However, there had been much metaphorical arm-twisting on the topic from many fronts.

It had started in the closed-door meeting the night of the reception, three weeks ago. Jenko, Silence, Kate Ericsson, Benn Hyse and Myst had all been present, along with one other slender dark-skinned man and an unfamiliar Nadder, colored in mottled green and yellow.

The newcomer had given Sam a bad turn at first. Although dressed casually, in blue jeans, green polo shirt and fringed leather vest, he bore a frightening resemblance to former Secretary Gupta, now committed to a mental hospital. The only thing which kept Sam from dropping into 'fight' mode on the spot was the sight of the Nadder holding its head just behind the man's shoulder, purring softly, clearly at ease.

Though she tried hard, Frida Nerison couldn't hold back a laugh at Sam's surprise. "At ease, Ranger Shay" she said, as she guided him over to meet the newcomer. "You're not hallucinating. This is Doctor Durjaya Gupta, former Secretary Gupta's son."

"Please, call me Jay" the man replied, brilliant white teeth flashing in a smile as he stood up and took Sam's hand in a firm grip. His

voice was soft, but penetrating, with just a hint of a New Delhi accent. "I am so very pleased to meet you, Ranger Shay" he continued, turning to the Nadder. "Please forgive me if my appearance startled you. This is my dragon companion, Samir."

Sam returned the handshake with equal firmness, then reached out to lay a hand on the dragon's muzzle in the traditional Berk greeting. The Nadder nudged back and said "Open sskiess and fair windss."

"And to you, Samir" Sam replied, surprised to hear the same New Delhi accent in Samir's speech. His mind raced, as he realized Murphy had thrown yet another curve ball his way. In my original timeline he thought, Gupta was never married, and his brother was his only other living relative!

As if temporal shifts weren't enough to throw him for a loop, Samir delivered his own surprise when he turned to address his human companion in clear Hindi. Gupta smiled again at Sam's expression. "Samir is still learning English, Ranger Shay. He is just three years out of the shell."

The smile faded as the Nadder continued speaking, and the man's golden brown eyes turned serious. "He asks you to forgive my father â€" as do I â€" for he is not in his right mind. In point of fact, he has not been for the last several years."

The vet's jaw worked for a moment before he finally replied. "I... Doctor Gupta, with due respect, I don't think it's that simple. Your father's actions caused the death of my immediate commander and friend, placed an entire nation under siege for who knows how long, and very nearly caused a disaster which could have killed many hundreds of thousands more, worldwide!"

Those eyes were amazingly expressive. They now held genuine regret. "This is all true" he replied, softly. "But it would not be fair to ask you to forgive without telling you of how he came to be the way he is now. I and Samir will understand if you choose not to forgive, and we will not think any less of you, but I must ask you to at least hear us out."

Sam took a deep breath, then let it out, slowly, and pulled up a spare chair. Silence settled next to him, looking for all the world like an enormous scaled cat, curiosity in her silvery gaze. "Fair enough, Doc â€" pardon, Jay. Please, call me Sam. No matter what, I would never hold you responsible for your father's actions."

Now it was Gupta's turn to sigh. "You may think otherwise after you have heard the tale, Sam. You see" he continued, his expression pained. "I have reason to believe I and Samir are partly to blame for his breakdown."

The vet's eyes widened. He heard a soft rustle of scales on concrete, as Silence's tail switched. "How...?"

"It happened many years ago. You see, my family and I are from the village of Joshimath, high in the mountains to the northeast of New Delhi."

Sam nodded. "I know of the area, but I've never been there. UNEC has responsibility for two of the wildlife reserves in the area, and one

â€" the Kedarnath, if I recall â€" was declared fallow and off-limits about fourteen years back."

Darjaya nodded. "You are correct. As you may also know, the mountain heights are thickly forested and contain many wonders of animal and plant life to attract young minds. I spent nearly all the time I was not in school, or helping my family, exploring the forest and hills.

"My mother and my teachers approved of my interest, and encouraged me to study what I was seeing and learning about in books and on the Internet. This should come as no surprise, as it was my mother to whom others brought injured or sick animals for healing."

"What about your father?" Sam asked, curious about the notable lack of mention.

Darjaya shrugged, and his eyes showed old pain. "How can one know what a father feels when that father is rarely in the home? Government service was my father's life, his passion. I know, now, that he was most upset when I showed no interest in following his life-path. But then? The few times he was in our home, he spent mostly in private with my mother." He breathed deeply again, then continued.

"This was a great puzzle to me, one which I went to great effort to understand. As long as I was home before darkness, my mother was not worried about my wandering, so I had much time to think on the problem." He smiled, ruefully this time. "Perhaps too much time. One day, while I was considering the many questions I had, I became distracted while climbing a tree. One of the branches gave way, and I fell many meters to the ground.

"The fall knocked me out, for how long I do not know. When I awoke, the shadows were long with the setting sun and the air was growing very cold. I tried to stand, and found I could not; I had sprained my left ankle.

"I was just starting to look for a branch to use as a cane when I heard a noise behind me, one I had never heard before. When I turned to see what it was, I nearly fainted from fright, for it was my first sight of a Nadder." He chuckled. "Our lives are filled with delightful ironies, for it turned out this particular dragon was Samir's mother."

Gupta's companion perked up on hearing his name and eyed his human friend quizzically. Gupta laughed, and spoke a few sentences in Hindi. Samir relaxed again with a look of smug satisfaction. "I explained I was telling you about his mother, and how she saved me" he said. "I fear pride is the one vice which all Nadders have in common."

Sam grinned and glanced at Silence. "Sounds like someone else I know" he said, then laughed as the Night Fury in question chuffed at him in mock annoyance and bumped his shoulder hard enough to rock him in his chair. "What happened then?"

"It was... unnerving" Gupta continued. "The Nadder â€" I have always called her Durga, though I never learned her true name â€" appeared to recognize me, as well as understand I was in trouble. She

approached " slowly, carefully, as I would a wounded animal " and looked me over very closely. Although I could see her teeth very clearly, I found myself in a state of great calm. Somehow, I knew I had nothing more to fear, as though the Great Buddha were watching over me.

"Then, before I could so much as sit up, she opened her mouth and reached down towards me. I was afraid again, certain Buddha was going to take me home in that very moment!

"Thankfully, it was not to be. Durga took my clothing in her mouth, enough to get a good grip " and then, before I could blink twice, we were rising above the treetops! I was too afraid to do anything more than sit still. After a few more minutes, I began to recognize familiar landmarks as we flew, and it was then I realized where we were going.

"She landed in front of our home, put me down very carefully, then backed up and seemed to be waiting for something. I called out to my mother and she came to help me into our home. Her eyes went as big as dinner plates when she saw Durga, but she was too concerned about what had happened to me to ask questions at first.

He frowned. "Unfortunately, this was also a day where my father had come home for one of his infrequent visits. More unfortunately, he was the first to see when Durga landed while she was still holding me in her mouth. When he got over his initial shock, he flew into a rage and tried to attack Durga, certain she had been about to eat me.

"This is when I first learned one way a Nadder will defend themselves. Her tail lashed like a whip, and I heard a whistling noise. The next thing either of us knew, my father was stuck to a fence post, a single tail-spine through his sleeve anchoring him as firmly as any nail. The spine, amazingly enough, never so much as scratched him.

"Durga flew away, then, and my father simply would not accept I had never been in any danger from her. He swore he would devote his life to making sure such 'creatures,' as he put it, would 'never threaten another human again,' refusing to believe me when I tried to tell him he should be thanking her! My mother tried to convince him as well but, as you probably know, the opinions of women are not often taken seriously in my culture, even in this day and age."

"Did you ever ssee her again?" Silence asked.

Gupta nodded, and the smile came back. "I did, a few more times, when I returned to the same place in the forest. The last time was shortly before I went away to the University of New Delhi. The question of why my father had been so angry is one which never left me, so I decided to get my degree in psychology."

"How did you find out about Berk?" Sam asked. "I know you wouldn't be sitting here now if you hadn't been 'read in' to the program, so to speak."

Benn Hyse spoke up. "Like you, Sam, he was asking all kinds of inconvenient questions and he was good at putting two and two together. He was initiated as an Outside Guardian shortly before I

took up the chief's post, and given access to our enclave within the Kedarnath preserve."

"Durriga sstill livess there" Myst added, fixing his gaze on Gupta. "She liked the name you gave her enough to adopt it."

Sam's eyes suddenly widened as more pieces dropped into place, and he turned back to Darjaya. "Saint Blaise Above" he breathed. "\_You\_ are overseeing your father's mental treatment?!"

Gupta shook his head. "Advising only. As you might guess, I am one who is too close to the problem to remain sufficiently objective." He sighed again, sadly, and Samir nudged him in concern. "So â€" There you have it, Ranger Shay. Believe what you will, but also understand I am doing what I can to help."

Sam closed his eyes for a long moment and leaned back in his chair, the vagaries of the timeline changes he knew he could never talk about to anyone else racing through his thoughts. \_The worst part \_he mused, \_is I can't be certain something I did â€" or didn't do â€" was responsible for the whole mess. Darjaya thinks he's responsible, and there may be some truth to that. But can I say with any certainty I'm any \_less\_ responsible?\_

Clarity came with its usual suddenness. Sam opened his eyes, sat up, and extended a hand to Gupta. "Please consider your father forgiven" was all he said.

Darjaya's dazzling smile came back as he returned the handshake. "You are very wise, Ranger Shay" he said.

Sam blinked. "About that" he said. "It's just 'Mr. Shay,' or 'Sam' now" he said. "As far as UNEC is concerned, I'm still 'dead,' officially speaking."

"So certain, then, are you?" Jenko said, with a slight smile of his own. "I didn't think any Ranger would be willing to give up their pension and benefits so easily."

"Sir?" Sam said, puzzled, but with a tiny spark of hope starting to flare.

"Dragons may have their own nation, Sam, even their own island" Benn Hyse said. "But it's going to take a lot of work before they're commonly accepted in the public sphere."

Sam had to flinch. Much as he didn't like the thought, it was true. It had taken the public nearly a decade to get used to the fact of cetacean intelligence, and that was when dolphins and whales had already been well known to the world!

"There will need to be safe places for people to come to learn about our new friends" Jenko continued. "Old Berk will be the first of many such places around the world."

"The New Berk Councssil agreess" Myst added. Sam was pleased to note Jenko didn't so much as blink at the sound of the dragon's deep voice.

"Which leaves only the question of what to do with you, Sam" Kate

said, trying hard to keep her grin under control.

"How so?" He replied. "I've already decided to stay on at New Berk, Kate. You know that." He grinned right back at her. "Practically begged me, so you did."

"What if another opportunity were to present itself, Doctor Shay?" President Jenko said, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "Say, with UNEC?"

Now it was Sam's turn to be surprised. "Sir?"

"If you are willing, of course" Jenko continued. "You see, it is obvious to me we're going to need a new base on Old Berk. Whoever commands this base will need to have extensive first-hand knowledge of dragon-human relationships. Also, under the UNEC charter, such a person cannot be a civilian: They must be a commissioned UNEC Ranger."

Sam's eyes bugged as he saw where this was heading. "Sir, with due respect... Ranger Hoshino has been a Berk liaison far longer than I have, has a dragon companion, and is fully commissionedâ€"

"â€"And will be an integral part of the Rangers at the new base, of course" Jenko finished for him. "Sam... It was on Ranger Hoshino's recommendation we decided to offer you the position."

"'Recommendation' may not be the right word" Kate put in. "If I recall, his wording was along the lines of 'Get Sam. No one else has quite the right mix of insanity and common sense.'"

The president chuckled. "True enough. So, Ranger Shay? What do you say?"

I said 'yes' he mused. Saint Blaise preserve my soul, I said 'yes.'

A soft chuff brought him back to the here-and-now. Silence eyed him curiously, the leather of her saddle creaking slightly as she turned her head. "You were flying alone" she said. "What thoughtss were taking you to ssuch heightss?"

Sam returned her gaze with a slight smile. "Why not just read my mind?"

Another chuff. "I do not lissten to otherss' thoughtss without their permisssion" she said, indignantly.

"Unless you think lives are at risk" Sam shot back. "You realize that's the ability which is going to unnerve people the most?"

Her wings rose and fell in a Night Fury's shrug. "Few among humans have the gift."

"To hear thoughts, yes. Usually, if a human starts hearing voices in their head, it's time to call in the head-shrinkers."

The quizzical look Silence produced, accented by her ear flaps rising slightly, drew a chuckle from him. "Iss it even possssible to sshrink

a human's head without harm?" She continued. "It sounds very painful."

"It can be, but not in the physical sense" said a new voice, as Kate settled herself on the grass beside them. She was dressed in her usual New Berk treads and jerkin, and set a large backpack on the ground next to her before reaching out to give Silence a friendly scratch along her neck. "Sam, what have I told you about \_relaxing more?!\_ You're on leave for the next month or so, until the new base can start basic operations, and ogling the construction crew isn't going to make it go any faster."

He sighed, and sipped his drink. "'Watched pot never boils' is it?"

She chuckled as she settled down, cross-legged, on the warm grass. "Along those lines, yes." She eyed him curiously. "I know that look. What's wrong? You've been downright moody for days!"

He took his time before answering, twirling his cup gently back and forth. "Curiosity" he finally said, turning to meet her gaze. "Conundrum, mystery, call it what you will. Out of all that's happened, there's still one small detail I can't figure out."

"What might that be?"

Sam shook his head, his expression serious. "Kate, one of my talents is recognizing patterns. Seeing the connection between seemingly unconnected events. I've spent a lot of hours running over everything that's happened since I first got sucked into that portal."

Silence gave him a surprised look. "So that is what has drawn you so far away! It must be of great importance..." She eyed them both, expectantly.

Sam smiled. "Maybe, maybe not. The best way I can sum it up is to ask you, Doctor Kate Ericsson, outright." The smile faded, replaced by intense curiosity. "How did you know?"

She blinked. "Say again?"

He took a deep breath. "From the moment I first called in, after waking up on that beach, \_you knew!\_ How I ended up in Old Berk over a thousand years in the past, how I got back, the works. You could have brought me to New Berk any time, saved me a hell of a lot of grief. Dammit all, Kate... \_Dash might still be alive\_ if you'd just acted sooner! \_How did you know?!\_"

She looked away, pain in her eyes, watching as the construction crew lowered a support beam into place. Finally, she turned back to Sam. "We knew" she said, softly, "because Hiccup left us a message."

Sam blinked in puzzlement as Kate unzipped a side pouch of her backpack and pulled out a reprinted and translated copy of Hiccup's Journal. "Page one-eighty" she said.

He flipped quickly through the book and his eyes bugged. There, taking up the entirety of the page, was an exquisitely-detailed sketch of an old Icarus-class VetMed aircar, complete right down to its tail number of UK5-AL19.

"We were going to tell you" Kate continued. "The Berk Council had already agreed â€" unanimously â€" to contact you and 'read you in to the program,' as Dash put it so well. But we all underestimated Gupta, and how far he would go. For some reason, Sam, he saw you as the ultimate threat to everything he'd built up, wrong-headed though it was. He saw to it you got that dose of Axonase. Dash was the only one in any position to do anything at the time.

"After that, direct intervention was out of the question, as Gupta would have known all about it and, possibly, launched Throwback before anyone could find out about it or prevent it. All we could do was drop what clues and hints we could and hope you could put the pieces together." She smiled, brilliantly. "And you did. I'm damn proud of you."

Sam put the book down, his finger marking the spot, and started swearing enthusiastically in three different languages. Finally, he looked at the drawing again, and continued. "That crazy kid! I warned him not to record anything about my visit! I went over, in disgusting detail, what kind of damage it could do to future events and he did it anyway!"

"He recorded more than that" Kate said, as she unzipped the top compartment of the pack and started rummaging. "Look at the next section."

Sam did so, not without a slight sense of dread. The dread turned quickly to fascination as he read through the notes which went with the next sketch, dated about five years after his visit: A full-body suit of what he thought at first was leather-and-worked-metal armor. But if it were armor, he wondered, why did it have sails or fabric or something joining the underside of the sleeves to the body...?

He kept reading, his original sensation of dread warring with fascination and speculation.

Riding a dragon is amazing. Flying in a ship which doesn't even have wings is just as amazing. But â€" flying as Toothless does? Touching the sky, riding the winds? You won't ever really understand what flight is until you try it yourself!

He looked up at Kate. The breath he took in to ask more questions froze in his chest as he took in her ear-to-ear grin and saw what she'd extracted from the backpack and now dangled from one hand.

It was a bulky coverall, made of a smooth pearl-gray material. There was a prominent bulge along the back, resembling a collapsed bat's wing. Translucent webbing joined each sleeve to the suit's sides. Sam could tell, when the wearer extended their arms, the webbing would stretch out to several times its collapsed area. A tiny camcorder was mounted to the suit's hood.

Silence was practically hopping with excitement. Her ear flaps were standing straight up, and her pupils were dilated so far there was barely a ring of color visible. "It'ss perfect!" She hissed, excitedly. "Ssam, put it on, quickly!"

He didn't answer right away, but reached out to feel the cloth. It was woven of the same material used to line the inside of body armor,



a mix of Kevlar-3 and ballistic xenylon. Nearly impossible to tear or puncture, and a featherweight compared to the heavy antiques worn by police in the early 2000's.

Not even ex-Secretary Gupta could fail to put two and two together on this one. Sam's eyes widened again and he started to back away. "Ohhh, no. NononononoNO! Dragonback, yes, ultralights, yes. Hell, I'll even try hang-gliding! But \_free-fall?!\_ In a... a... \_bat-suit?!\_"

Warm breath suddenly ruffled his hair. He turned to look straight into a pair of pewter-toned eyes, full of warmth and humor, framed by glossy black iridescent scales. "Ssam" Silence said, quietly. "Do you think I would ask this of you if it was truly dangerous?"

"Sam" added Kate, her grin fading a bit. "Knowing what \_you\_ obviously do, about the dangers of altering the past, would you go back and save Dash if you could, with no way to know of the consequences?"

"I did not know our former liaison well" Silence added. "But I do know this: To cloak yourself in fear is to dishonor his memory and everything he believed in."

Before he could answer, a gentle thought brushed across his mind: \_I will not let you fall.\_

It took Sam less than five minutes to get into the suit, with Kate's help. It took longer to climb to what Silence deemed a 'safe' altitude for practice – about 3000 meters, Sam guessed – before she leveled out into a glass-smooth glide. "Whenever you are ready" she called back to him, "keep your arms tightly in at first and let yourself roll off my back."

He took one last look at the ocean, far below, and gulped. A fragment of his old fear rushed in for a moment, threatened to overwhelm him –

\_No!\_ He told himself, firmly, closing his eyes and flashing back to all the previous practice time he and Silence had spent in the air. For good measure, he recalled the ejection drills he'd been put through in Ranger flight training. \_This\_ he thought, with a touch of amusement, \_is actually safer\_ than an ejection seat. No explosives to deal with!\_

With this in mind, he took a deep breath, eyes still closed, and rolled off Silence as smoothly as if he'd done it a hundred times before, his wild call of "BANZAIIIII!" whipping away in the wind. He could hardly breathe, but it didn't seem to matter all that much. The force of the wind, thundering past him, filled in where his chest muscles didn't feel like cooperating.

He could \_feel\_ Silence's excitement now, just as much as her reassuring presence, as she matched his dive precisely. She roared for the sheer joy of it, orbiting slowly around him. A thought brushed his mind: \_Open your eyes.\_

He did. Much to his surprise, Silence was directly in front of him – and the \_world itself\_ was rotating around them! He gasped, then let out a whoop of delight. Silence let her tongue loll out, flapping

in the wind for a few moments.

Suddenly, the urge to extend his arms flashed through his mind. The webbing opened with a snap like the granddaddy of all sails, followed by another \_snap \_from his back as the dorsal stabilizer automatically extended, and it was all Sam could do to keep his arms straight. His speed slacked off immediately, though it still felt like he was falling at a frightening rateâ€

Until he suddenly realized â€" this wasn't uncontrolled falling. He was \_flying!\_ Actual, wings-to-the-breeze \_flight!\_ He could feel most of his weight pressing on his chest, across the upper part of his rib cage, just about where his keel would be had he been a bird. Curious, now, about his new skill, he flexed the fingers on his right hand to start a gentle turnâ€

â€"Only to cry out in alarm as the turn flipped him into multiple barrel rolls! The world spun crazily around him as he tried frantically to correct. Suddenly, a jar went through his left side and the spinning stopped.

Cautiously, he turned his head to the left. Sure enough, there was Silence, right wingtip above his left, stabilizing him until he got the 'feel' of it back. After a moment, she drifted a few meters away. Her mind-voice was full of amusement: \_I do not usually start my hatchlings on rolls until the second week.\_

She glided under him and he folded his arms back in, touching down lightly on her back. \_Up we go, try again\_ she sent.

\* \* \*

><p>The crane operator at the construction site was among the few who hadn't paid much attention to all the hullabaloo on the news, lately. He was a solidly built man, pragmatic to a fault. It made no difference to him if humans had suddenly been knocked off their self-made pedestal of 'superiority.' No one could run a crane like him! He knew it, his boss knew it.<p>

Everyone he ever worked with knew it as well. Such were his thoughts as he munched dutifully on a ham sandwich, enjoying the view from a hundred meters above the ground.

Had he been looking behind him, he might have had some warning. He was just measuring out more coffee from his Thermos bottle when several objects flashed by, barely three meters from the cab. The \_whoosh\_ of their passage startled him enough to cause the coffee to spill all over his pants leg, drawing several inventive curses from him.

When he finally recovered enough to snatch up the pair of binoculars he always kept with him (after all, one never knew when a rare bird might come winging by), and focus them on the objects, he blinked in disbelief. Slowly, he pulled the binoculars away from his eyes, cleaned each lens with meticulous care, and tried again.

The image remained the same: A man in some kind of grey monkey-suit, paced by a big black flying lizard and two smaller ones (blue and green, he thought), all playing their own version of 'Pole Position' across the sky.

Very carefully, he put the binoculars back in their case, and started the crane's engine. \_Focus on work\_ he told himself, firmly. \_Best medicine in the world for seeing things!\_

### \_Epilogue\_

The Labor Day weekend of 2092 brought more than early-Fall colors and clear, warm weather to the Bay Area. To many, the first Saturday in September also brought something worth camping out the previous night to attend: The annual parking-lot sale and open-house at Tesla's Basement.

While the store certainly drew crowds year-round, its Labor Day event was something special, even by the somewhat jaded standards of the Bay Area's techies. It was the only day of the year when the place threw open the innards of its voluminous warehouse for public browsing. Electronics, computer, networking and lab gear of every imaginable description got bought, sold and traded in quantities and sizes from backpacks to bulk pallet-loads.

Thanks to the presence of the huge open grill, set up at one end of the parking lot, it was also an event where one needed to go no further than a few tens of meters for food or drink. The aromas of chicken, turkey and other meats, sizzling in home-made sauces, drew almost as large a crowd as the warehouse entryways. Laughter and conversation filled the air, punctuated by periodic cheers and applause as someone scored a particularly noteworthy deal.

At one end of a warehouse aisle, containing mostly robotic assembly equipment in various states from ready-to-run to "needs work," Bryan Lind and John Landon were closing a deal with a pair of customers over an automated chip programmer. "And" Bryan said, rummaging in a beat-up looking wood crate on a nearby pallet. "With that price, we'll throw in this rare, vintage, uhh... 'accessory'... absolutely free of charge! At least, we will as soon as I can find the thing..."

His upper body disappeared into the crate, prompting John to eye him dubiously and brace his legs. Clanks and clunks sounded from the crate's interior as its contents were unceremoniously (and somewhat violently) shifted.

The would-be buyers, a dark-haired bearded man and a tall woman, both dark-skinned with a hint of 'Islander' about them, merely watched with amusement as one of their hosts all but disappeared into the crate. "Is he always like this?" The woman asked John, with a smile.

"Oh, no" replied John, blandly. "Most of the time, he's much sillier. I'm surprised he hasn't offered to paint the programmer hot pink..."

"I'll 'pink' you in a minute!" came the muffled reply, followed by a caw of triumph. "Ha! Knew it was here!"

The object Bryan held up moments later left everyone with raised eyebrows. Mounted on a flat piece of plexiglass was a brown plastic cylinder suspended between a pair of thick posts. The cylinder was covered in some sort of rough, dark-blue synthetic fabric. Even more

preposterous was the small, long-eared equine shape, also molded in brown plastic, positioned so it was clearly leaning against the cylinder.

"Do I even want to know?" John muttered, trading a long-suffering look with another of the warehouse staff, a tall blond man dressed entirely in black and known affectionately as 'Spike.' The blond eyed the thing for a moment, then chuckled. "Maybe, maybe not, mate" he said in a prominent Aussie accent.

The bearded man sighed. "All right, I'll bite, though I think I'm going to regret it" he said. "What in blazes is that thing?"

"I know exactly what it is" a new " and familiar " Irish-accented voice spoke up from the end of the aisle. "It's a nylon dark cardigan on a plastic mule-rest!"

"There's no such thing!" The blond staffer shouted out, right on cue, with a huge grin.

"Thank you, Spike!" Bryan called, gleefully, as groans erupted all around. He tossed the hunk of cheap plastic back into the crate.

"Tell the truth, now" Sam said, stepping carefully over the equipment littering most of the aisle. "You had that thing purpose-built, didn't you?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny such a viscous rumor" Bryan shot back, clapping the vet on the shoulder. "Good to see you, Sam!"

Startled shouts suddenly echoed through the warehouse, accompanied by much bird-like chirping and squawking. "Incoming...!" "Watch where you're flying...!" "...the frell \_are\_ those...?!" "...rock have you been hiding under? Watch the news once in a while...!" "...little demon! That was my \_lunch\_!"

Sam winced, and slapped a hand over his eyes. "Oh, Mother Machree" he muttered. As the others exchanged puzzled looks, the vet turned towards the open end of the aisle and let loose a piercing whistle, coupled with the mental equivalent of \_get your wings and tails over here NOW...!\_

A pair of colored streaks, one blue and one green-yellow, came barreling around the corner at top speed, heading straight for Sam. Knowing full well what was coming, the vet braced himself against a handy support as the two all but tackled him, chirping with excitement. Nalu belched, giving everyone a clear indication that Terrible Terrors found pizza just as appealing as fish, while Niho was trailing several iridescent streamers of what looked like pallet-wrap.

Sam gave the others an apologetic look. "Sorry about that" he said, sheepishly. "These little fellows are among the most curious and energetic of dragon species."

Although John and Bryan did a good job of holding in their surprise, the visiting pair of customers were not so restrained. Much explanation followed, combined with much fussing over the dragons

once introductions were made.

In stark contrast to their earlier antics, the pair were suddenly on their best behavior. Niho, bolder than her mate, even went as far as to clamber over each visitor's shoulders, much to their startled delight.

Eventually, the initial excitement wore off. The programmer followed its new owners home, and Sam followed Bryan and John up to the office for drinks and story-trading. The two dragons promptly made themselves at home on Kenya's window platform, staring goggle-eyed at the activity below and exchanging a steady stream of chirped comments.

"For someone who likes to keep a low profile" John said, as they settled on the couches, "you've been all over the media lately."

"No kidding" Bryan added. "Still, you done good! We're both proud of you." He grinned, raising his glass in a toast. "To Interesting Times!"

"I couldn't have done it without your help" Sam said, after they'd all taken a drink. "Though how you managed to hack into an in-house audiovisual system at the UN in Geneva, just in time to turn the tide, is something even I'm having trouble figuring out!"

The innocent looks the pair adopted were downright comical. "We can neither confirm nor denyâ€" John began.

Sam rolled his eyes. "â€"Such a vicious rumor." Yes, John, I know. I also know there's bloody few people on the planet who could have pulled it off, and you two top my list!"

"'Viscous'" Bryan corrected. "Very important distinction. And we didn't do it alone. We had some... mmm... shall we say 'local help?'"

"Of course!" Sam exclaimed, clapping a hand over his eyes. "Jarod."

"Much easier for someone already inside a secure system to pull stunts like that" John said. "But what brings you here, Sam? You're commander of the new UNEC base on Old Berk, which means you probably don't have a lot of time for vacations."

"Now they're going to have to put an old UNEC base on New Berk, just to balance things out" Bryan muttered. Suddenly, his eyes widened. "Hey! I wonder if we could locate a surplus base through our pipelines...?"

"Down, boy!" Shouted Sam, with a grin. "I think turning you two loose against UNEC's quartermaster corps would be a crime against humanity."

Both men bowed deeply. "A higher compliment is not to be found in this part of the world" Bryan said, matching Sam's grin. "But seriously" he said, the grin fading. "What brings you out here? Do you need a crash-spot?"

Sam put his glass down and shook his head. "Not staying that long, at

least not this trip. As you so accurately pointed out, there's plenty for a base commander to be doing. I had to pull some strings just to get away for a couple of days so I could bring you two this."

He reached into a pocket of his work uniform, pulled out a data card and handed it to John. "And this would be?" The techie asked, eyeing the card curiously.

Sam just smiled. "Read it."

Still looking puzzled, John picked up a PADD from the table and plugged the card into it. "It's an E-book" he said a moment later, as Bryan slid over to see the screen. "'Elements of Cetacean Communication,' by Kanja Jumbe, Ph.d..."

It took them only a few more moments to figure out the book's significance. "Holy crap on a cracker" Bryan said, softly. Then he looked over at Sam. "This is from your original timeline, isn't it? It has to be! If anyone had worked out a translation scheme, it'd be competing with the dragons for news space by now..."

"And it will be" John said, with a wicked grin, as he paged through more of the book. "The prototype translation mechanism looks like something we could put together in a couple of months, if we call in some more hands and a few favors." He leaped off the couch and dove for his desk. Keys clicked like agitated castanets.

Bryan snorted. "You won't need to burn too many favors to get help for this one. I can think of at least four people who'd fight with each other just for the chance to do the program code, once they found out what it was for \_and\_ that it had a significant chance of success!"

"No matter who does the coding" John said, as he divided his attention between the PADD and his keyboard, "I think I know one thing for certain." He looked up, still grinning ear to ear. "Sea World is going to crap bricks!" He cackled, maniacally, and continued typing.

"That's putting it mildly" Bryan agreed. "So is every other place that's ever kept captive cetaceans, with the likely exception of our friends in the Keys."

"Who do you think I'm messaging?" John exclaimed. "Mandy would never forgive us if we didn't at least let him know about it."

Bryan chuckled, then looked over at Sam. "So. Why us? You could have made a deal with any university or even any of the animal-rights groups on the planet, and been set for life. Why bring it here?"

Sam sighed. "I could give you the predictable cliché about the world being introduced to one sentient, non-human, species already, why not two, etcetera, ad nauseum.

"Instead, let me put it this way: Some time before I got sucked through that portal, wormhole, cosmic garbage chute, whatever it was... I spent two years working with a dolphin team at one of the Japanese research stations" and I can already save you some effort, John" he added, with a grin, as the techie put down the PADD and started typing something else. "It doesn't exist in this

timeline."

John muttered something in a language Sam didn't recognize, though it seemed to have more than its fair share of consonants. "Not anatomically possible, even for a \_t'argh\_" Bryan shot back, then turned back to Sam. "You were saying?"

The vet put his curiosity aside with an effort, and continued. "The truth? I don't have \_any\_ high-and-mighty expectations or high-flung ideals about this one, Bryan. While their sense of humor runs a bit high on the shock side for this cranky old vet, I couldn't help but respect those crazy fins. They'd play as hard as they worked, and vice-versa. Seeing them stuck as nothing more than circus performers, with no one even suspecting they could be much more?"

He shook his head. "I don't know what will ultimately come of revealing Jumbe's book to this world, this time, this culture. I have no way to know how similar â€" or radically different â€" it is from the one I left behind. Saint Blaise Above, I don't even know if the timeline change affected the way our finny friends evolved! For all I know, they could have ended up no smarter than a bright dog!"

"I hear a 'but' in there" Bryan said, softly.

Sam nodded. "'But,' indeed. In this case, it takes the form of 'I want to at least give people the chance to check it out.' The technology's never been the problem. It's whether we, as a species, are ready to have that question we've been asking for so long â€" 'Are we really alone?' â€" answered in, as President Jenko put it, a most unexpected way."

Bryan smiled again, and squeezed Sam's shoulder. "Good enough for me. Stay put a minute."

He got up and moved over to his own desk, exchanging a glance with John. "Let's do this thing, then" he said. "I'll see if I can track down Dr. Jumbeâ€" "

"â€"And I'll start rounding up components" John continued.

The vet smiled slightly as he watched the two go into a flurry of computer and phone activity. Any remaining doubts he might have had about how best to handle Jumbe's book vanished like a blown-out candle.

A soft thump drew his attention to a tawny-gold feline shape which had landed on the cushions beside him. Yellow-green eyes capped by elegant black-tufted ears held his, as Kenya purred a greeting and pushed his head against Sam's shoulder. Two words drifted into Sam's mind: \_Hunted well?\_

Sam laughed softly, as he stroked the caracal's silky fur. "Very well, Kenya. Very well indeed."

The big cat purred in approval, then padded over to his window and exchanged a long look with the two dragons. Everyone held their breath, firmly aware of how most felines felt about their territory.

Then, to everyone's astonishment, the two Terrors moved quietly

aside, leaving a large gap in the middle. Kenya leaped effortlessly into the spot and settled down in what most cat-people called the 'Meatloaf' position. The two dragons did their best to imitate him, and soon all three were surveying the activity below with quiet fascination.

Bryan let out the breath he'd been holding. "Wow" he murmured. "We could all learn something from that lot!"

### Acknowledgements

No story, no matter if it's one page or ten thousand, comes together out of thin air. Although it would take up as much space as this story did to recognize everyone who helped, and even more to explain many of the references and 'nods' contained herein, I can't close without acknowledging the most important.

First and foremost, deepest thanks to my wife, Dana McLeod-Lane. Good beta-readers are tough to find, while great ones are even harder. I got lucky and landed on the 'Great!' square.

To Cressida Cowell, Dean DeBlois, Chris Sanders, Will Davies, Adam Goldberg and the entire crew at Dreamworks, without whom we would never have known it was even possible to 'train' such amazing creatures.

To Doctor Andrew 'Andy' Abshier, DVM, for providing valuable insight into how veterinarians do their thing. I hope you like your brief cameo!

To my fellow writer, 'Norwesterner,' for graciously allowing me to dovetail with his 'Taming a Heart' universe.

To John Lanfri, fellow techie, mischief-maker and brother-in-spirit, for allowing himself to be vacuumed into the story without prior knowledge. It's comforting (and a little scary) when someone trusts you that much.

To Jim and Chuck Schuetz, owners of 'Weird Stuff Warehouse' in Sunnyvale, CA. Their store provided the backdrop and inspiration for Tesla's Basement. Although it lacks the DIY labs, training classes, second level and radio club facilities, Weird Stuff is still a must-visit for any electronics or computer techie, no matter what your skill level.

The idea of non-human sentience is nothing new. Thousands of other writers have worked such ideas into their stories, including such notables as Andre Norton ('Catseye,' 'The Zero Stone' and various 'Witch World' tales), Arthur Clarke ('Dolphin Island') and David Brin (any of his 'Uplift' novels). What is relatively new is the possibility of their being (much) more than a grain of truth in the concept.

If I had to pick one thing about our own species which puzzles me, deeply, it would be the inherent contradictions in our belief systems. Many of us are perfectly willing to accept, on pure faith, the idea of God "of a supreme being, a higher power in the Universe (or Multiverse, as the case may be). Yet these same people seriously doubt their own senses should they experience any kind of paranormal activity.



More specifically to the point of this story: How many billions of dollars and centuries of effort have we spent, as a country (the United States) and as a species (all other countries) on astronomy, radio telescopes, satellites, moon shots and long-distance probes, all in search of an answer to one simple question: Are We Alone?

We're perfectly willing to entertain the possibility of intelligent non-human life as long as it's somewhere 'Out There' in space. The Voyager probes are clear evidence of that much. We seem most unwilling to even consider the possibility the answers may be right here at home, perhaps swimming in our world's oceans.

As far back as the 1960's, Dr. John Lilly demonstrated that dolphins do indeed have a complex language. He went as far as trying to decode their communication with the best computer equipment available at the time (sadly, the available technology simply wasn't up to the challenge).

Decades later, Dr. Lou Herman demonstrated that dolphins can not only learn a synthetic sign language, he has shown they can comprehend sentences and are capable of dealing with abstracts. Most recently, a study conducted by Dr. Diana Reiss has shown dolphins may have self-awareness, a faculty we once thought exclusive to humans.

There have been tremendous advances in computer and digital signal-processing technologies since the 1960's. A common Android 'SmartPhone' has more raw computing power and capabilities than the systems which took us to the moon, or which ran the space shuttles!

Given these advances, given the mass availability of computing power which was only a dream just forty years ago, I would really like to know: Why hasn't someone attempted to apply those advances to, again, decoding cetacean language? The cost would likely be a tiny fraction of what we keep spending on wars-of-choice and military might, and the potential rewards are nothing less than staggering.

What is it we're afraid of?

I'll be the first one to admit the whole idea might be completely bonkers, an utter waste of time and energy. It's entirely possible dolphins are, as Karen Pryor once put it, somewhere between a bright dog and a chimpanzee on the intelligence scale.

But isn't it also possible the opposite is true? That there is much more behind those dark eyes than anyone has dared consider?

Isn't this a question which deserves better than to be brushed off as the stereotype of 'Talking to Flipper?'

For further (non-fiction) reading on this subject, I would heartily recommend "In Defense of Dolphins," by Dr. Thomas White. If you're curious about my use of the term 'aquatic circuses,' and some deeply alternative views on such places (SeaWorld included), I would suggest "Spectacular Nature: Corporate Culture and the SeaWorld Experience" by Susan Davis, as well as the more recent 'Death at SeaWorld' by David Kirby.

No matter what the answers might be, I think we would do well to remember that a whole bunch of invitations have already gone out, via Voyager and various other ways, for anyone who has the capability to visit our world and say hello.

We should not be surprised if someone does, at some point, accept such invitations.

Hunt well, fly well, and be the best person you can be no matter whether you wear scales, fur, feathers or clothes!

End  
file.